

CONTENTS

	Glossary of Translated Titles	8
	Translator's Preface	10
	Introduction	11
Chapter I	Mademoiselle Demahis	14
Chapter II	Mademoiselle Michel	30
Chapter III	The Growth of Louise Michel	42
Chapter IV	Paris is cold, Paris is hungry	60
Chapter V	Long Live the Commune	77
Chapter VI	Louise and Theophile	96
Chapter VII	The Verdict	113
Chapter VIII	The Great Voyage	130
Chapter IX	New Caledonia	145
Chapter X	Triumph	165
Chapter XI	Snares and Delusions	180
Chapter XII	Work or Bread!	206
Chapter XIII	More Prisons	228
Chapter XIV	Politics and Literature	252
Chapter XV	The Chouan's Revenge	279
Chapter XVI	May 1, 1890	301
Chapter XVII	England the Free	315
Chapter XVIII	The fight has just begun	335
Chapter XIX	For society tolls the bells	354
Chapter XX	Comes the Revolution... ..	378
	Research Sources	402
	Works by Louise Michel	403
	Bibliography	406
	Footnotes to Chapters	411

Glossary of Translated Titles

- Union des Poètes* — Union of Poets
Alliance des lettres — Literary Alliance
Ministère de l'Instruction publique — Ministry of Public Instruction
Société pour l'Instruction élémentaire — Society for Elementary Education
Droit des Femmes — Women's Rights
La Société/Démocratique de moralisation — Democratic Society for Moralization
La Libre Pensée — Free Thought group
Comité de moralisation par le travail — Committee of Moralization through Work
Société de secours pour les victimes de la guerre — Aid Society for the Victims of War
Société des femmes pour les victimes de la guerre — Women's Society for the Victims of War
Fédération des artistes de Paris — Federation of Paris artists
Éducation nouvelle — New Education
Société des amis de l'enseignement — Society of Friends of Education
Commission du travail — Labour Commission
Société des libres penseurs — the Society of Free-Thinkers
Légion Garibaldienne — the Garibaldi Legion
Union des femmes pour la défense de Paris et les soins aux blessés — Union of Women for the Defence of Paris and Aid to the Wounded
Société de géographie — the Geographic Society
Société d'acclimation — the Acclimatization Society
Congrès régional ouvrier — the Regional Workers' Congress
Cercle d'études sociales — Social Study Circle
Union des femmes socialistes — Union of Women Socialists
Société de solidarité des proscrits — Solidarity Society of the Proscribed
La ligue des femmes — the League of Women
Commission de répartition de secours aux familles des détenus politiques — Commission for the Distribution of Relief to the Families of Political Prisoners
Académie française — French Academy
Parti Ouvrier — Workers Party

BLACK ROSE BOOKS

dedicates this book

to the memory of

Christine Levesque,

who, during her short life, carried the anarchist
tradition nobly

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Translators always face the question of whether to translate titles (particularly of organizations and of social and institutional ranks) or to leave them in the original language. As anyone who has read many translations will know, there is no standard, single way of solving the problem. Indeed, one could quote precedent for almost any combination of translation and non-translation that one chose to offer.

I have based my own choice on one simple assumption: most people who read a translation do so because they do not speak the language of the original publication. For these readers, constant use of untranslated titles is a barrier to comprehension rather than a welcome note of authenticity. I have, therefore, opted for maximum translation — undoubtedly more than purists will enjoy or those familiar with French will need but, I hope, useful for everyone else. (Even the untranslated word “rue” has been capitalized so as to make it conform visually to the normal style of the English sentences in which it is now being used.) The exceptions to my general rule of full translation are newspaper titles, book titles and poetry. Any untranslated reference needed for comprehension of the book is explained in a translator's footnote.

Most of the translator's footnotes, however, are there to expand upon a reference rather than to translate it. My goal, once again, is accessibility. I have written these footnotes for the reader who does not have detailed knowledge of French history, politics, culture and nineteenth-century legal institutions. I hope that those readers who are well-versed in these matters will forgive the necessarily cursory nature of my explanations and feel, as I do, that the advantages of offering them outweigh the risks of doing so with such brevity.

P. W.

"Officers, do not strike her. Be respectful. Judges, be silent. This old madwoman is worth more than you who call her 'the Michel woman'. If you persist, you shall convince me that she is a saint. Why? In her, the flame burns."

Barrès, *Notebooks*, VI, 91

INTRODUCTION

Hagiography is always unsatisfactory, whether in honour of Saint Teresa of Lisieux or of Louise Michel. Saints (of whatever religion) and revolutionaries possess strikingly similar virtues and defects. The problem is that unquestioning faith, especially when linked with the noble goal of moral and spiritual instruction, tends to exclude critical judgment. As a result, saints are usually portrayed as absolute simpletons, whereas in fact they have often been people of more than average subtlety and intelligence. Notorious revolutionaries have suffered the same fate — witness the crowds who flock to Lenin's tomb, so as to worship the relics. And we know how far the USSR has pushed the cult of "positive heroes" and the damage thereby done both to literature and to historical accuracy.

Louise Michel might have escaped this fate, had she not been taken over by the communists. (She, the patron saint of anarchism!) Anarchists themselves, however, have played their part in this beatification, for they attach little importance to the past and are even more given to a *tabula rasa* approach than are the Marxists. Existing biographies of Louise Michel — by Emile Girault, Fernand Planche, Irma Boyer, Hélène Gosset, among others — suggest that, whatever the author's political allegiance, an excess of blind devotion has produced yet more legend-building.

One must add that writers from the other end of the political spectrum have treated Louise Michel with such

venomous contempt — *pétroleuse*,* “shrew” and “madwoman” being among the milder epithets — that these biographers were under considerable temptation to overcompensate.

Obviously, a biographer cannot hope to understand his subject unless he feels at least a flicker of sympathy for that subject. But he should beware outright admiration. While he may hope to end up admiring his character, he should not start out with undue respect.

My own initial feeling toward Louise Michel, when I discovered her among the *pétroleuses*, was one of curiosity, mixed with an attitude which makes me prefer the Commune despite all its excesses to Versailles and, more generally, the vanquished to the victors and the victims to their butchers.

Louise Michel offers us the advantage that, unlike the other women of the Commune, she wrote a great deal — too much, in fact! — and while her outpourings are hardly literature, they do permit us to understand her somewhat better, to look for her true face behind all the public speeches and battles. Moreover, she lived a very long life and never ceased being an active participant in the events of the day. In fact, she acted upon her revolutionary faith literally to the day she died. This is a rare phenomenon: generally, we find that age brings with it a preference for repose over action, peace over struggle and the calm of one's garden over the tumult of public meetings. In short, age usually causes passion for the Revolution to wither along with the other passions, making way for more tranquil pursuits.

Not so with Louise Michel. She was always amazingly youthful and never ceased playing the singular role that she had created for herself. “Good Louise,” “the Red Virgin” (as her friends and innumerable crowds called her), that extraordinary old woman with her black gowns, her shabby little fur tippet and her silly hat, remained the high priestess of anarchism to the very end, though it brought her no financial gain.

She would undoubtedly have taken to the barricades in May 1968, urging the rebellious students on by word and deed.

* a coined term, to describe women accused of deliberately setting fire to Paris with homemade kerosene (“petrol”) bombs during the final battles between Communards and the Versailles troops. There is still controversy over the true causes of the extensive fire damage of those last days of the Paris Commune of 1871 — *transl. note*

It's hardly likely, though, that those young people were thinking about their heroic grandmother or even knew that their protest (which they thought they had invented) was in fact the continuation of an old tradition.

For anarchism is the hope of a better society, one in which man shall be free. By now the evils of the governments born of twentieth-century revolutions have been documented. And so anarchism — the absence of government, the direct administration by people of their own lives — is still intact as an ideal, for it has never been tried. The fundamental difference between anarchists and Marxists is that the latter say anarchy will be the final stage of political evolution but meanwhile take none of the steps which would help lead to it, while anarchists want it right now, in all the confusion and disorder of right now.

Anarchy, then, is "the song of our tomorrows." History so far has brought us only blood and tears; man's hopes must take refuge somewhere.

I wish to thank all those who helped me in this work, especially MM. Choury, Bossi, Decker, Meurgey de Tupigny; Mmes Hubert and Harburger, Mlle Benoit, M. Hunink (Amsterdam) and Yvonne Lanhers.

E.T.

I - MADEMOISELLE DEMAHIS

There's a problem right from the start. "In the year eighteen hundred and thirty, on the twenty-ninth day of the month of May, at six o'clock in the evening, before the undersigned Etienne-Charles Demahis, mayor of Vroncourt in the canton of Bourmont, department of Haute-Marne, appeared Claude-Ambroise Laumont, forty years of age, doctor of medicine domiciled in Bourmont, to declare that on the twenty-ninth day of the month of May, at five o'clock in the evening, a Miss Marie Ann *Michel*, housemaid living in the Vroncourt chateau, had given birth in said residence to a child of the female sex, whom he hereby presented and to whom he gave the name *Louise* and the surname *Michel*. The said declarations having been made, and the witnesses Joseph-Benoît Girardin, thirty-four years of age, cutler living in Vroncourt, and Claude Desgranges, thirty-four years of age, landowner in Vroncourt, having been introduced, declarer and witnesses signed in the presence of the undersigned the present act of birth, this act having first been read aloud to them. A. Laumont, doctor of medicine, Girardin, Desgrange, Demahis."¹

This curious birth certificate sets the stage. Who was the father of this servant's illegitimate daughter? Was it Etienne-Charles Demahis, mayor of Vroncourt, before whom the declaration of her birth was made? Or his son, Laurent? The good people of Vroncourt speculated busily — and a number of biographers' pens have since joined the speculation, for that "child of the female sex" turned out to be the "Red Virgin," the

Great *Citoyenne*," the "Good Louise," the "*pétroleuse*."* Well-intentioned hagiographers — Irma Boyer, for example²— claim that the sexagenarian mayor might well have been the father. In any case, she was certainly a Demahis: the membrane found between her toes was a hereditary trait in the family and Mme Demahis³ tacitly recognized the claim by raising Louise as her own granddaughter. The behaviour of her son, Laurent, however — who so left the chateau to live on a neighbouring farm — would suggest that in fact it was he who had made the blonde servant a mother and then refused to marry her, despite the egalitarian principles with which he had been raised.

Marianne, one of six children of a widow named Marguerite Michel, had herself been raised in the chateau with the Demahis children, Laurent and Agathe.⁴ Childish games can easily turn into games of another sort... Louise herself provides the key to the question of her birth in her *Mémoires*, provided one reads them through to the end (p. 459): "I am what is known as a bastard, but those who bestowed upon me the sorry gift of life did so freely; they loved each other. None of the miserable tales told concerning my birth are true, nor can they besmirch my mother. Never have I known a more honest woman." This "mad revolutionary" had a highly conformist attitude to virtue. In a letter to Victor Hugo, written long before her *Mémoires*, she explained: "My grandmother had raised the daughter of a poor widow in her own home. Her son loved that girl, and then abandoned her along with their child. She was my mother. I have been told of the dreadful storm which I, all unknowingly, thus caused to break out within the family... And that, Hugo, is why I am despised."⁵

Louise exaggerates. As a child, she may have suffered from being known as a "bastard," this may have given her (to use today's jargon) an "inferority complex," but it was in no way the fault of her paternal grandparents. Until their deaths, they raised her as the *demoiselle* of the chateau. Indeed, she was known in the region as Mademoiselle Demahis.

Old Etienne-Charles Demahis (who had prudently, come the French Revolution, run the aristocratic particle "de" in his surname together with the rest of that surname) was not one of those stiff and haughty country squires who yearn endlessly for

* see transl. note p. 9

the "old days" and make a virtue (for want of anything better) out of their families' ancient names. Yet, his ancestry was such as to flatter any man's vanity.

It can be traced to the seventeenth century: there are records of an Etienne de Mahis, attorney in Aubigny, and a Jean de Mahis, Seigneur de Breuzé, who was elected councillor of Bourges. In 1696, Hozier's book of heraldry described the coat-of-arms of Etienne de Mahis, public prosecutor in Paris, as follows:

*"Argent, a chevron azure
in chief two crescents gules
and in base a duck sables.
Supporters: two lions."*

It is highly appropriate that this heraldic bestiary should come so early in the story. Louise had a passion for animals all her life; she would surely have liked the little duck and the two lions (except, of course, for their association with nobility).

To continue: in 1705, a Joseph de Mahis, lieutenant-grenadier of the Saint-Sulpice regiment, was proclaimed a Knight of the Order of St. Louis by Louis XIV, "for his singular valour, his experience and his great talent in war" (a cannonball had shot off one of his legs in 1702). Throughout the eighteenth century, the legal profession carried on in this family from father to son: Etienne de Mahis was president of the Bar in the Paris parliament; his son, also an Etienne, was a King's Councillor and died at Vroncourt at the age of eighty-seven.⁶ Etienne-Charles Demahis, Louise's grandfather, barrister in the Paris parliament prior to the Revolution, was thus the direct descendant of an imposing array of prosecutors, barristers and King's Councillors. His wife, Louise Charlotte Maxence Porquet, also belonged to a highly-esteemed family of magistrates. The nobility of France attended their wedding.⁷ But they belonged, as well, to an intellectual nobility, for they were among the supporters of Voltaire, Rousseau and the Encyclopedists who had first helped prepare the Revolution and then (in many cases) denounced it in later years. Not the Demahis family, however: they maintained their republican convictions to the end.

The lineage was very different on the Michel side of the family. marianne Michel, the blonde blue-eyed servant, was born in Audeloncourt on April 20, 1808.⁸ In her *Mémoires*, Louise Michel describes her mother's uncles, Simon, Michel and

Francis (handsome old men, with thick red hair), and her mother's brothers, Georges the miller, another Michel, and a third one who loved travelling and died in Africa. All these peasants had a taste for learning. An ancestor of theirs had once purchased, by the kilo, the entire contents of a library. Thanks to those old chronicles and novels (published, of course, with the king's sanction), they taught themselves to read. Then there were her grandmother's sisters and her mother's two sisters: Victoire, who remained in Audeloncourt, and Catherine, who settled with her husband on a farm near Lagny.⁹

Unlike the Voltarian Demahis family, the Michels were extremely pious. Louise's Aunt Victoire had entered the novitiate in the Langres hospice but was prevented by poor health from taking her vows. "Never have I known a more ardent missionary than my aunt. She loved everything that was exalting in the Christian religion: the sombre hymns, the evening visits to churches bathed in shadow, the lives of the virgins, so like the stories of druids, vestals and valkyries. All her nieces were swept up in this mysticism as well — I, perhaps, more easily than all the rest."¹⁰

Two ancestral portraits nicely capture these strong, and strongly contrasting, family backgrounds. One shows Marguerite Michel, the peasant woman with her fine "Gaullish" features peeping out from her pleated white coif. The other shows Mme Demahis, the eighteenth-century intellectual, her eyes burning with intelligence and her hair cut short in the fashion of the Empire, a lady who retained her youthful spirit all her life.¹¹

The mingling of these two currents — the disciples of the Encyclopedists and the "Jacques"* — was not all that fired Louise Michel's unbounded imagination. She also treasured family legends ("fallen with the garden roses, dead with the bees; those who told them to me shall never speak again") which drew in other ancestries as well: Bretons and Corsicans, green-eyed ships'-girls and wraith-thin witches roaming the wilderness.¹² *These* ancestors were far more immediate to Louise than any genealogy.

The Vroncourt chateau, whose ruins were later described by Barrès as "chilling every faculty of the soul," was the ideal setting for dreams and legends.¹³ Its square towers and win-

* nickname for peasants — *transl. note*

dowless southern façade led it to be known in the region as “the fortress” or “the tomb.” Even in Louise’s childhood, it was already dilapidated, “an immense tumble of ruins through which the wind blew as through a sailing ship.” To the east, a curtain of poplars and the blue mountains of Bourmont; to the west, the slopes and forests of Suzerin, from which wolves emerged to howl in the chateau courtyard during the fierce winter snowstorms.¹⁴ The dogs howled back. Louise loved those winter nights when the family would huddle around the fireplace in an icy room, to read or to listen to stories. Grandfather Demahis, in his white flannel greatcoat, would recall the battles of the First Republic, “when the Whites and the Blues showed each other how to die like heroes,” or else — dropping the epic style — would evoke Molière’s laughter, Voltaire’s irony, the intellectual masters of his youth. Sometimes, Mme Demahis would seat herself at the piano and accompany her own songs.¹⁵

The surrounding region was also filled with legends. A very old woman named Marie Verdet (“she must have been a hundred”) told of the apparitions of phantom washerwomen at the Fontaine aux Dames. It is all quite reminiscent of Joan of Arc and her Fontaine aux Groseilliers, not so distant from Louise in time and space, despite the four centuries that separate them. (Rest easy, the comparison between Louise and Joan of Arc shall end there.) The first phantom washerwoman, said the old woman, wept for days gone by; the second for days that are; and the third for days to come. Then there was the “*feullot*,” red as fire, sometimes seen beneath the willows by the mill.¹⁶ Marie Verdet talked about the folk traditions of long ago: people used to visit the ruins and conjure the spirits, carrying a piece of silver for the Devil, a burning candle for God, a white shirt for the dead...and a knife for the conjurer, in case he broke his oath.¹⁷

Louise learned the village songs as well, and never forgot them:

*Dans l’champ fauvé c’étot,
Un bel agé chantot...
Dans le champ fauve c’était
Un bel oiseau chantait
Tout noir il était
Si fort sanglotait.
Que disait-il l’oiseau,
L’oiseau de champ fauve...? ¹⁸*

"Who would not have become a poet in the countryside of Champagne and Lorraine," a land whose roots go back to the most distant past? There were still routes in the district which had been paved by the "conquering Romans"...and, here and there, dismantled again by the "unconquered men of Gaul." 19

Louise's Demahis grandparents counterbalanced her cherished peasant legends and traditions by offering her the best possible education — the education befitting young ladies of good families who were kept at home rather than sent to the convent. At first, she went daily to the simple two-room village school (in fact, one-room, for the second room was the teacher's lodgings). She acquired a reputation for practical jokes. For example, during dictation she would write not only required text, but all the teacher's asides and interruptions as well. The end result was always something like: "The Romans were the masters of the world Louise do not hold your pen like a stick semi-colon..." When the teacher discovered this, however, he informed her that "if the inspector saw that, it would mean my dismissal." "I was overwhelmed with sorrow." Thereafter, Louise took care that her mischief was never of the sort that might put her "Master" at risk. 20

Her grandfather introduced her to Corneille, Molière and Hugo; later, at the age of seventeen, Lamennais' *Paroles d'un croyant* brought tears to her eyes. 21 When her cousin Jules (Aunt Agathe's son) spent vacations at Vroncourt, she read all the books he had brought with him from college. This inspired her to write a universal history of the world — to replace the one by Bossuet, which she found very boring. 22 Her grandmother saw to it that she learned music theory and piano, as a *demoiselle* should. 23

The rest of the family was somewhat annoyed at the type of education being given Louise. Aunt Agathe once exclaimed to Marianne, in the little girl's presence: "Are you mad, giving this child music lessons? She already tends to forget her position!" 24 Such remarks left bitter scars in Louise's memories, yet in her *Mémoires*, she said of Aunt Agathe: "I loved her enormously and she spoiled me a great deal." 25

Games, just as much as education, make an impression on children and help develop their personalities. Never, in all her long career as a teacher, did Louise Michel meet children "simultaneously so diligent and wild, naughty and considerate, lazy and ambitious" as her cousin Jules and herself. All

children climb trees, chase the pigs and throw apples at each other — but this pair would climb to the treetops and from there shout their “secrets” at each other: Jules had sent Mme George Sand a loveletter but received no answer; Louise had drawn a magic circle and tried to call up Satan, but with equal lack of response.

Louise made herself a “lute” out of an old piece of board. She made a second one for her cousin, and the children happily produced dreadful sounds together. They put on plays like *Les Burgraves* and *Hernani* (which they rewrote for only two actors), and enacted the scenes from the Revolution which their grandfather had so often told them. They built brushwood gallows behind the well in the courtyard and mounted the steps to martyrdom with cries of “Long live the Republic!” They were Saint-Just, Jean Huss, the Bagaudes*; they searched history for its cruelties and injustices.²⁶ But Louise was also a very devout little girl, though this is never mentioned in her *Mémoires* (which reflect only that which she was later to become). She faithfully attended church, even “carried the Virgin,” an honour reserved for members of the congregation.²⁷ When her grandfather died, she even (briefly) considered devoting her life to God in order to save his Voltarian soul.²⁸ Louise Michel was not nearly as straightforward and consistent as she later wished to appear.

One thing *was* consistent, though: her love of animals. It started in Vroncourt, where there were dogs, cats, an old mare (whose head Louise and her grandfather tenderly covered over when they finally buried her beneath the acacia by the chateau’s bastion wall), a tortoise, a doe, a wolf, wild boars, bats, broods of orphaned rabbits that had to be spoon-fed, and mice that could be heard scurrying about behind the ancient green tapestries. And, of course, there were the horses, which came right into the chateau’s rooms to nibble bread and sugar from people’s hands. Louise had to go to the stables, however, to see the cows (Bioné, Bella and Nera), who looked up at her with large, sorrowing eyes. In the summer, the chateau was filled with robins, sparrows and meadowlarks.²⁹ Once, when Louise was eight or nine years old, the sight of a goose running about with its head cut off filled her with such horror that, for a

* the Gaullish peasants who rebelled against Roman rule; by extension the term came to mean poverty-stricken rebels in general, or peasants in general, and usually both at once — *transl. note*

long time, she refused to eat meat.³⁰ She hated the peasants' cruelty to animals, and the way children casually tortured birds, kittens and puppies.³¹

It was only a short step from concern for animals to concern for human beings and the hardships of the peasantry. Conversation in the huts wasn't restricted to tales of the *feullot* and the phantom washerwomen. An old woman talked about the year the profiteers had starved the whole countryside; she and her husband and four children often went to bed without even bread in their bellies. "Poor folks just have to accept these things, they can't do anything about them." Louise, in a mixture of rage and pity, started to cry. "Don't cry like that, little one, it makes God cry, too." ³²

So Louise began helping the people who needed it most. She probably didn't yet dream (as she claims in her *Mémoires*) of changing the world, but she did begin to give away fruit, vegetables and even money she stole from her grandparents. Sometimes the peasants came to thank the old people for their gifts, and Louise would laugh at the resulting scene. Once, her grandfather offered to give her twenty *sous* a week, on condition that she stop stealing. "But I thought I'd lose money on the deal." She had filed down some old keys until they were the right shape to open the pantry door: "You've got the lock, so I've got some keys." But really, there was very little money in the Vroncourt chateau. The Demahis property brought in next to nothing, and the family verged on genteel poverty.³³

All these little vignettes smack of a certain amount of halo-polishing and indeed, Louise writes them up with more than a touch of complacency. Yet they have been independently confirmed. Barrès (who once intended to write Louise's biography and therefore collected a good many verbal accounts of her life) wrote that "even as a child, she kept nothing for herself. She once gave her shoes away to a poor man." One aged crone, nearly a hundred years old, told him: "One day Louise was drinking coffee from a golden cup. I said to her, 'I'd rather have the container than its contents.' She answered, 'Oh! If that would make you happy...' She gave away everything she had." ³⁴

Few outsiders visited the chateau regularly, its inhabitants being far too original in their thinking to take pleasure in the company of the usual conformists. The Laumonts were frequent

visitors, however — father (the Bourmont doctor, who also enjoyed playing the flute) and son (a teacher in Ozières). Sometimes they all made music together, with Louise or Mme Demahis at the piano and M. Demahis playing his cello.³⁵

Music-making was not the only pastime in the chateau. They also did a great deal of writing. Mme Demahis kept a "Family Book," in which she recorded all family events in verse. (Louise's world history went in there as well.) On her husband's name-day, for example (the feast of St. Stephen), Mme Demahis honoured him with this poem:

*Celui que nous fêtons est un saint très humain,
Un bienheureux vraiment recommandable
Qui sait et qui permet aux autres d'être aimables,
Pour les pauvres pêcheurs ayant beaucoup d'égards...*

In short, a man worthy of Voltaire and Diderot. "All affection is his enemy The Graces and the Muses loveth he..."³⁶

When one of her sons died, Mme Demahis transcended her own suffering to think of everybody else who suffered as well:

*O vous que le malheur poursuit
Je partage votre souffrance
Et je pleure dans le silence
Mon fils et les malheurs d'autrui...³⁷*

Old Demahis also like to try his hand at some poetry:

*A des antiquaires
Vous voulez des antiquités?
Nous voilà deuz dans les tourelles
Que couvrent des nids d'hirondelles,
Ma femme et moi, vieux et cassés.³⁸*

This sort of word-play was a common pastime in eighteenth-century chateaux. Louise, as a child, loved these family customs and soon began to write verses herself on holidays and birthday.³⁹ Poetry became a much more serious affair, however, with the advent of Romanticism. Louise may have been a mischievous child, but she was also a dreamy disciple of Lamartine and Hugo. In Vroncourt, poetry was as natural a means of expression as was the murmur of the brook, or the wind breathing through the willows. Louise often hid away in the north tower to play her "lute" and sing, like Ossian,* her poetry:

* according to legend, a Gaelic bard of the third century. An eighteenth-century Scottish poet, James MacPherson, published "translations" of the bard's work which were, in fact, his own verse. The fraud created an international Romantic vogue for heroic "early Irish" themes — *transl. note*

*Je n'ai jamais franchi nos paisibles villages
Et cependant mon front est avide d'orages.
Seigneur, Seigneur, mon Dieu, livre mon aile aux vents,
Ou rendez-moi semblable aux paisibles enfants,
Que nulle voix n'appelle au soir dans les nuages.*⁴⁰

Her poetry was often not very good but then, even Lamartine and Hugo — the giants of the day — left a great deal of bad verse behind them as well. Louise even dared to send some of her poetry to Hugo, who — oh, bliss! — replied and encouraged her to write again.

The child wondered constantly about the destiny that lay before her. She once wrote a graphologist named Vitu, whose articles she had found in the newspapers, sending him one of her poems and her signature ("Louise Michel," not "Louise Demahis"). It was an ambivalent sort of gesture, as much challenge as petition, for Louise had been strongly marked by her grandfather's rationalism and only half-believed in the occult sciences which were then so fashionable.

*Des ombres du tombeau, Nostradamus s'éveille
Sous le nom de Vitu, le voilà journaliste...
Eh bien, sire devin, voici ma signature...*

Did she have black hair? White hair? Did she prefer "shadow and mystery" or "the splendour of day"?

Si j'ai rêvé la gloire, ou le cloître, ou l'amour?

Or:

*Le murmure du saule et des roseaux sur l'onde
Parlent-ils à mon coeur plus qu'une vieille croix?*

Would a galloping steed carry her off over mountains and through raging storms:

*Dis-moi, maître sorcier si, modest fileuse,
Je vois couler ma vie uniforme et rêveuse...
Dis-moi si j'aime mieux danser dans la prairie
Que prier vers le soir à l'autel de Marie?*

And she threatened, should his horoscope turn out to be inaccurate, to cry aloud from "the topmost turrets"

Qu'au devin ont menti les esprits inferneaux.

Vitu had used the adjective "imperial" to describe the work of a famous poet. Some revelation! One didn't need a sorcerer's gifts to see that. But was he able to tell *her*, "an unknown, distant star," who she was, what she loved and what her fate would bring?

*Je défie et l'auteur et son latin lui-même.*⁴¹

Unfortunately, nobody knows if Vitu ever rose to the challenge. What a pity! The *demoiselle* of Vroncourt would surely have provoked a fascinating handwriting analysis and a very strange horoscope...

Her life so far had gone along very evenly, really very pleasantly. Laurent had married and fathered two more children, who treated their half-sister with great affection. Laurent himself even began to treat his illegitimate daughter with more warmth.⁴² Then, on November 30, 1845, old Etienne-Charles Demahis died.⁴³

Remember that Mme Demahis did not believe in life after death. She expressed all her sorrow and despair in a poem:

Le deuil est descendu dans ma triste demeure.

La mort pâle est assise au foyer et je pleure.

*Tout est silence et nuit dans la maison des morts...*⁴⁴

Louise thought of devoting her life to God. She turned her tears into verse as well, thinking with terror what might happen when her grandmother died, leaving Marianne and her all alone:

Hélas, pourquoi ces jours ont-ils passé si vite?

Déjà tu restes seule et sur ton front serein

J'ai peur de voir une ombre et que tu ne me quittes

*Comme au jour où l'aieul mourut, tenant ma main...*⁴⁵

Attempts had already been made to find a husband for Louise — after all, at the time marriage was the only acceptable future for a young woman, and the only alternatives were prostitution or the convent. Louise, however (unlike her mother), was not pretty. On top of that, she was illegitimate. The Demahis family, on the other hand, had provided a dowry and so marriage was not entirely impossible. Indeed, two suitors did come to vie for Louise's hand. She thought them ridiculous creatures "who followed each other around like geese, or haunting spirits." One of them had a glass eye, which Louise mocked rather cruelly. Worse, he was looking for a contemporary St. Agnes,* and Louise had no intentions of filling the role. As for the other suitor — Louise threatened to turn him

* an odd choice, given that the original was martyred in the fourth century for refusing a good marriage because she wished to remain a virgin and dedicate her life to God — *transl. note*

into a George Dandin.** 46 Louise really hadn't the temperament to marry at all, though at this stage her ideas on the subject were nowhere near as clear as they were later to become (protestations in her *Mémoires* to the contrary). At the very least, one can say that the superior education she had received and the freedom she had been given to develop her personality were not likely to turn her into the female ideal of the reign of Louis-Philippe: a submissive girl, ready to become the obedient wife of a solid provincial bourgeois. However obscurely, Louise already dreamed of great love with a man worthy of such love — or no love at all.

Ever since the death of M. Demahis, his widow and Louise had been giving piano lessons. It earned them a little money, it distracted them from their sorrow, and it was useful to others. One of their pupils was a young woman named Adeline Beaudoin, who until then had been taking her music lessons at the convent. Fifty years later, the old spinster still remembered Louise, Mme Demahis, the piano, its keys so worn with playing that they looked "like teaspoons," and lunches taken in the dining-room with Marianne, though Mlle Beaudoin's sister ate in the kitchen. The dining-room contained a bed covered with black silk, on which rested a sword decorated with the long crêpe streamer of perpetual mourning: this had been the sword of old Etienne-Charles Demahis.⁴⁷

Five years later, on October 23, 1850, Mme Demahis died as well.⁴⁸

*J'étais triste déjà, pourtant la froide pierre
Ne couvrait qu'un d'entre eux; et voici maintenant
Qu'une autre fois encore aux murs du cimetière
Le gouffre s'est rouvert, affreux, noir, effrayant...*⁴⁹

The Demahis wanted to assure at least Louise's immediate future, and so left to her eight and a half hectares* of land, worth something between eight and ten thousand francs.⁵⁰ Louise was still a minor, and so they also made arrangements for a tutor, M. Voirin, the former magistrate of Saint-Blin; a governess, Marianne; and a substitute tutor, the notary-public, M. Girault. The tutors were indeed faithful guardians of the legacy and took steps to preserve it for her. Louise intended to

* cf. *George Dandin, ou le Mari confondu*, by Molières — the hapless Dandin is a rich peasant who marries an impoverished aristocrat and is led a sorry dance thereafter

** almost twenty-one acres — *transl. notes*

remain single: "We have encouraged this disposition, in order that your children may, in turn, be *her* heirs," wrote M. Voirin to Mme Laurent Demahis (now a widow, and waiting her chance).⁵¹

The old, romantic chateau, which had been Louise's home for twenty years and influenced her so deeply, was to be sold. Marianne and Louise had to leave, though they had no idea where they were to go. Louise crept off to her turret, and wept:

*Adieu mon nid d'enfant, ma rêveuse retraite,
Adieu ma haute tour ouverte à tous les vents...
Tu reverras sans moi venir les hirondelles
Qui dans les jours d'été chantent au bord des toits.
Ne manquera-t-il rien, dis-moi, sur tes tourelles,
Quand leurs tristes échos ne diront plus ma voix...*⁵²

Louise was full of such despair, abandonment and sheer loneliness that she wrote again to Victor Hugo, seeking his comfort: "Hugo, you would understand the love a prisoner would feel for a single ray of light gleaming through his solitude. Let me therefore confess my thoughts to you, as if you were here before the fireplace in my grandmother's chair and I held your hand in mine as I so often held hers through the long evening hours..." She enclosed, "for you alone," the story of her life — extremely romantic pages that must have pleased the poet very much, with long descriptions of the chateau settling into ruins, its legendary curses, the Lady in White and the Sabbath rituals by the fountains. "But all I ever saw was moonbeams sleeping in the grass," the pond "whose reeds murmured like complaining voices" and the willows "that bowed low over the water when the village angelus-bell rang, as though they too honoured the Virgin Mary..." She confided in him the hurts and slights which she could no longer take to the Demahis for comforting. One day an old woman said to her, "Go sleep in the graveyard, child." Some little girls had flung at her, "Go join your father." And now, with her grandmother's death, she was being "alternately spurned and courted." She sent Hugo the outline of a faery opera; she told him she had just read *La Tristesse d'Olympio* and had been greatly moved by two of its lines:

*Ecoute, Olympio, Dieu fit nos âmes soeurs
Et n'eut qu'un seul souffle en créant nos deux coeurs.*

She undoubtedly felt herself his "kindred soul" — a common illusion among impressionable female readers. But if

she were not, if she were only his guardian angel, then she dared offer him some advice. Was it true that the Bourbons might be called back from exile? If so, "it is your role, O poet, to be the first to raise your voice in support of such a beautiful, such a great and serious inspiration." Then she apologized for the length of the letter and promised that, in any event, she would not send another.⁵³

But she did. Louise couldn't resist pouring out her soul to another soul worthy of those confidences. In March 1851, she wrote him once again, her last letter from the Vroncourt chateau, which had now been sold. "Ah, no. The letter that I sent you shall not be the last, though I pronounced it to be so in one of those moments of discouragement that led me to doubt everything and everyone, except you... Are you not a brother to me, Hugo? More than a brother, for we have but one soul." "She who had pledged herself to God" (this, therefore, was to be a platonic love) thanked him for having invited her to write frequently to him. She sent him some poems which she hoped would be published in *L'Événement*, under a masculine pseudonym. (Thanks to Daniel Stern and George Sand, male pen-names were very much the fashion.) "It seems to me that if people didn't know it had been written by a woman, its ideas might have some impact." In one of her poems, "A la Patrie," Louise begged amnesty for the troublemakers of May 1849 and condemned deportation:

*Royalistes ou républicains,
Qu'importe le sceptre des rois,
La baïonnette citoyenne,
Les lys ou le vieux coq gaulois...*

For, taken as a whole,

*C'est la France de Charlemagne
De Jeanne d'Arc et de Henri...*

The poem continued in this singular vein (conveniently forgotten by the time she came to write her *Mémoires*, in which she presents herself as staunchly republican from childhood on):

*Des rois je recherchais la trace
Dans les récits de nos splendeurs.
Mon luth ne savait que leur race
Et ses exploits et ses grandeurs.*

Whatever had happened to grandfather Demahis' lessons on the French Revolution?

*J'ai maudits les hordes sacrées
Qui de leur courage enivrée
Combattaient pour la liberté.*⁵⁴

There should be a general amnesty. The nation should be reconciled by a pardon that covered revolutionary and royalist both.

*Rendons et famille et patrie
Aux fils du peuple, aux fils du roi.*
Let pardon be the guiding rule:
*Qu'il soit notre arche d'alliance
Et Dieu protégera la France...*

At this stage of her life, the young *demoiselle* of Vroncourt was very similar to the God-fearing, right-thinking young girls who would later flock to *L'Action française*.^{*} O poet, raise your voice:

*Grâce pour les descendants
O grâce au nom de Louis seize
Pour les fils de la royauté
Et pour les hordes populaires
Miséricorde, car leurs pères
Sont tous morts pour la liberté.*⁵⁴

The poem was signed, "L. Michel Demahis." One may fairly call it a hymn to liberty — however one may choose to define that word — and liberty was to be one of Louise Michel's most consistent themes.

Marianne was most anxious about her daughter's future. Traces of her anxiety come through in the poems which Louise dedicated to her — poems hardly designed to calm maternal fears:

*Mère, pourquoi frémir, quand je te dis mon rêve?
Le pêcheur endormi voit en songe la grève;
Moi, je vois je ne sais quel mirage lointain
Qui se mêle à l'aurore, à la nuit, au matin...
Je suis toute en orage et rien ne m'inquiète...*

Fortune, even life itself, were of no importance:
*A celui dont l'amour est par-delà les cieux
Dans l'immense infini plein d'astres radieux.*

The only love with which that love could be compared was the love she bore her mother. Therefore:

^{*} a daily paper (1908 - 1944) and a movement born of the Dreyfus Affair; ultra-nationalist, monarchist, anti-liberal and anti-democratic; supported the Vichy government during World War II — *transl. note*

*Pourquoi pleurer, quand, seul, à ce vaste infini
Pourrait le disputer, mère, ton nom béni?* ⁵⁵

Marianne was not the slightest bit reassured by all this. A peasant woman, a servant, she knew that writing poetry and making music didn't earn a living. And one had to live. But how? Louise had refused the idea of marriage, she'd refused the idea of entering a convent (despite her resolves at the time of her grandfather's death); the only choice left was for her to become a schoolteacher. Until the age of twenty, the girl had lived a privileged life. Now, she would have to face life entirely on her own. "Mademoiselle Demahis" was dead. "Mademoiselle Michel, schoolteacher" was about to be born.

II - MADEMOISELLE MICHEL

The exact chronology of events in Louise Michel's life is extremely difficult to determine, for her *Mémoires* are virtually the only source of information and in that book she keeps changing directions, covering her tracks, skipping essential points and going off on irrelevant tangents, almost as if she were trying to conceal something. (It is thoroughly modern in its incoherence...) But I think there is one simple good reason at the heart of this systematic refusal of chronological order: Louise Michel lied about her age. Whether sparring with the judicial system or providing biographical data under calmer circumstances, Louise consistently claimed to have been born in 1836, rather than (as was the case) 1830. This is a traditional practice on the part of beautiful women, but a curious indulgence by a plain woman who — as we shall see — was never preoccupied by affairs of the heart. Unfortunately, her school records, which might at least have enabled us to set precise dates for her life in Haute-Marne, were stolen in 1883 (probably by some local official who wanted a "souvenir" of the now-notorious lady).¹

So we are left with Louise's word. According to that word, she spent a few months in the fall of 1851 with her mother at her Aunt Catherine's home near Lagny. Catherine's husband was afraid that Louise might not hold to her stated intention of becoming an elementary schoolteacher, abandoning pedagogy for the wail-o-the-wisp life of poetry instead. He accordingly enrolled her for three months in Mme Duval's institute in

Lagny, where his own daughter had trained. Louise briefly considered becoming an assistant schoolmistress, which would have meant continuing her studies in Paris. But, she writes, she did not wish to be separated from her mother at that time.²

It was during this same trip that she had a most important encounter — and yet, one which scarcely receives a passing mention in her *Mémoires* — “My mother and I saw [Victor Hugo] in Paris in the fall of 1851.”³ That’s all. And that’s strangely little, considering she was talking about her “brother,” her “kindred soul,” her adored poet and confidant from Vroncourt days to whom she had sent countless letters in his exile.* Louise says her mother was with her at the time of the meeting, but we have only her word for that. Louise, after all, was twenty-one years old at the time. It seems unlikely that she dragged Marianne all around Paris with her as a constant chaperon. Twenty years later, in 1870, she was to appear in Hugo’s *Carnets intimes* with the notation, “n.” According to the erotic code worked out by M. Guillemin** (which is not necessarily to be believed), “n” stood for “nude.”⁴ But in 1870, Louise Michel was forty, a rather advanced age at which to start playing the striptease, even in homage to the master poet. It seems far more likely that, if there *was* a relationship between them (amorous for her, erotic for him), it began in 1851. Hugo loved all women quite indiscriminately, the ugly and the slatternly included; he couldn’t have been unaffected by this girl’s burning emotions. Unfortunately, however, his *Carnets intimes* for that period are missing. And Louise threw a pious, proper, entirely bourgeois veil over the subject of her relationship with Hugo, so there is nothing to be learned there, either. Later on, she was just as equivocal in her account of her passion (almost certainly platonic) for Théophile Ferré. In this area at least, the “Red Virgin” was a thorough-going conformist, a perfect Victorian.

Whatever may have happened in Paris, Louise did decide not to stay there for her teacher-training. She returned to Haute-Marne with her mother and, while her mother went off to live with her own mother Marguerite and her sister Victoire, Louise went to Chaumont and did her normal-school studies with Mmes Beth and Royer. The student teachers were all

* Hugo left France immediately after Napoleon III’s coup d’état of December 1851, not returning until the emperor’s downfall in 1870

** Henri Guillemin, *Hugo et la sexualité*, Gallimard, Paris — transl. notes

book-mad: "The real world stopped at the door. We devoured every crumb of scientific knowledge that came our way, and just enough crumbs appeared to whet our appetites for the rest; but alas, there was never enough time to pursue that 'rest'."⁵ They had to study for their examinations, earn their diplomas so that they might then earn their livelihoods, memorize the curriculum. "We thought that curriculum all-important" and only later, "when it shrank back to its proper dimensions," did they realize how little they knew.

Louise was consumed with intellectual curiosity. The Demahis had brought her up to believe that "schooling" was not synonymous with "culture" and that one had to go far beyond the textbook. She was enthusiastic about everything. Just as she had remembered the Vroncourt legends of the phantom washerwomen and the *feullot*, just as later she was to collect the Melanesian legends of New Caledonia, so now in Chaumont, she made note of the tales of the "diabolical arts." In her book *La Haute-Marne légendaire* (left unfinished, as so many of her books were), Louise described a macabre ceremony dating from the Middle Ages and thought to be still practised at the end of the eighteenth century. Every seven years, the story went, twelve men dressed as devils (twelve, like the twelve apostles or the twelve signs of the zodiac) and joined the Palm Sunday procession. They would practise their "devilcraft" until the feast of St. John and then stage the grand finale, the torture and burning of an effigy of Herod. As Louise noted: "No festival was complete without some torture in those days — or in our own, for that matter." It was also said that one year, Herod's soul had writhed in the flames and that same day a handsome singer had mysteriously vanished: "the victim of love's revenge." This crime put an abrupt end to the old tradition. Like all romantics, Louise adored the legends of crime and romance, and took a certain sadistic pleasure in the descriptions of martyrdom and torture.⁶

She continued to write poetry. Through the intermediary of M. Joly-Lahérard, a former correspondent for *L'Echo du Peuple*, she sent the editor-in-chief some of her verses. When the editor reacted favourably, M. Joly-Lahérard revealed that they were the work of "a young Miss." He added, "She could send you more, and some very clever prose as well. If you declare, as I hope you will, your intention of making her a regular contributor, then I shall tell you her name."⁷

Louise's literary debut in the local paper annoyed Mme Laurent Demahis a great deal, particularly since the girl had signed herself "Michel Demahis," thereby linking the family name with the highly suspect, entirely frivolous, field of poetry. Voirin, Louise's tutor, scolded her very soundly and was then able to write reassuring words to Laurent's widow: "I spoke to the author with some severity, telling her that the least of her sins was the fact she had committed so many errors of sense, grammar and style. There'll be no further improprieties, whether of publication, signature or style, for she now understands that she has behaved very badly, on all three scores." In that same letter, Voirin once again said that Louise intended to remain single and therefore urged Mme Demahis to remain on good terms with Louise, even if only for the sake of the inheritance: "Therefore, behave with moderation at all times. You will not regret it. Louise is a member of your husband's family; she is bound to it by moral sentiment, in the absence of any other tie."⁸

On September 27, 1852, having finally received her teaching diploma, Louise declared that she intended to open a private school in Audeloncourt. The mayor granted her the necessary permit: "Louise Michel...being in possession of an elementary schoolteacher's licence, has made to us the following declaration, duly accompanied by the documents required by article 27 of the education act of March 15, 1850 and the decree of October 7 of that same year. The undersigned has declared to the mayor of the municipality of Audeloncourt her intention to run a private school for girls in the Causelle home, on Rue du Ham."⁹ Louise, as required, forwarded this declaration to the departmental prefect on October 1. The prefect, however, took his time with it and on October 28, she had to ask him to acknowledge its receipt.¹⁰ Louise was later to claim that she opened a private school so that she would not be required to pledge allegiance to the Emperor. This is possible but not probable, for her republican sentiments were not yet very strong. Each of her students paid one franc a month and, since she was too young to be allowed to run a residential school, children from the outlying areas were lodged in the homes of local citizens.¹¹

While in Audeloncourt, as later in Millières, Louise continued to send her poetry to *L'Echo de la Haute-Marne* (successor to *L'Echo du Peuple*, which abruptly turned into a

rather compromising title when Napoleon III became emperor). These poems were as orthodox, as respectable as even the authorities might wish. *Le Voile du Calvaire*, for example:

Jésus sur son épaule avait penché la tête.

Il s'éleva partout un souffle de tempête

Et toute clarté s'éteignit.

L'horrible mort trembla, les rochers se fendirent

Et comme Christ mourait, les tombes se rouvrirent

La mer frissonna dans son lit.

Or another example, *Rorate Coeli desuper*:

Versez, grands cieux ardents, versez votre rosée.

Des souffles ennemis, la terre reposée,

A germé le Sauveur...

The time had come for the hawk and the warbler, the wolf and the lamb, to be reconciled:

Bénissez Israël,

Et bénissez Jacob: laissez tomber votre onde

Partout où l'on a soif, Seigneur, et que le monde

Se transfigure en ciel.

Louise was inspired to particularly indignant verse by the murder of Bishop Sibour by a priest, during the inauguration of the Novena of St. Geneviève in Saint-Etienne-du-Mont. Her poem evoked all the world's calamities — famine, poverty, plague — and then:

Quand semblable à l'autour planant sur la campagne

La peste étend sur tous les voiles du tombeau,

Paisible, on voit s'asseoir en haut de la montagne

La mort comme un berger qui compte son troupeau...

Bishop Sibour had rallied to the Empire, thereby drawing down upon his head all Victor Hugo's curses from his distant rock,* but nonetheless, his death brought tears to the eyes of that "republican," Louise Michel:

Mais quand l'impie armé vient frapper sa victime

Jusqu'aux pieds des autels, quand au fond du saint Lieu

De notre siècle étrange, épouvantable crime,

Le sang du prêtre enfin se mêle au sang de Dieu...

When, in addition,

Un prêtre est l'assassin, alors l'enfer lui-même

L'enfer qui l'a poussé, recule en frémissant...

What could one do? Pray and weep, your forehead to the

* Hugo spent years of his exile in the Channel Islands — *transl. note*

dust; don the hairshirt and keep nightly vigil.

Two martyrs in eight years. The first, Bishop Affre, had died on the barricades for his homeland, in June 1848.

L'autre au pied de l'autel pour le nom de Marie

*O Paris, que fais-tu, dis-moi, de tes pasteurs?*¹²

By temperament, Louise was, and would always remain, a "committed" writer. Literature had to be a form of action and at this time, action to her meant charity. In September 1853, this schoolteacher who (she tells us) was always at daggers drawn with authority wrote the prefect of Haute-Marne, M. Froidefond, to suggest ways of combatting misery and want in the department. "We must set up an office of charitable endeavours, create job-sites and public workshops wherever employment is scarce. Without work, people lack bread, and when they lack bread, they often find gunpowder and bullets..."¹³ Her appeal for social reform had some results: the prefect and his wife sponsored a public subscription drive for funds with which to open an office of charitable endeavours and a public workshop, just as she suggested. Louise herself contributed one hundred francs, a considerable sum of money at the time. Her appeal "to philanthropists" was accompanied by a poem entitled, *Aux pauvres: l'humanité bienfaisante*.

Et le Christ se penchant sur les cités bruyantes,

Sur nous laisse tomber des pleurs.

It was the role of the poet to call for charity among men, rather than war among nations:

Prie à genoux la foule, appelle à la croisade,

Et debout sur la barricade,

Tenant en mains la sainte Croix,

Dis à tous: ce n'est plus le siècle de la guerre

Combattons, mais le crime et l'horrible misère...

And so Louise mounted her first barricade, but on behalf of social peace. Alas, poets were too frequently unheeded, and so Christ must intervene: the rich must open their purses so that workshops might in turn open for the poor. And then,

Retrouvant partout la paix de l'Evangile,
the reign of Peace would finally begin.¹⁴

This was a characteristic illusion of the 1848 uprising, a time when priests solemnly blessed "liberty trees" and people hoped that the Gospel would be enough to change the world.

I obviously don't fault Louise Michel for having been a devout Catholic. One may, however, fault her for hiding this

fact in later years and pretending in her *Mémoires* that she had always been the revolutionary she later became. The notion of retroactive historical truth, which Louise shares with the communists, poses a good many problems. It is especially unfortunate in the case of Louise Michel, for it obscures the inherent logic of her evolution from compassion and religious fervour to a sense of justice and revolutionary fervour. Her driving instinct for charity never changed; the changes came in the ways she chose to express that charity.

Her own descriptions of her early years as a schoolteacher are very hard to reconcile with this highly orthodox piety. Republican convictions and deep religious sentiment are not necessarily in contradiction to each other, but during the Second Empire, they seldom co-existed. Louise harps on her disputes with the authorities, but never mentions the good relationship she had with the prefect. In fact, she tells us that she had her Audeloncourt students sing the "Marseillaise," which was then considered a seditious song,¹⁵ that she taught them it was sacrilege to pray for the Emperor and that they therefore filed out of the church as soon as the congregation began chanting, "Domine, salvum fac Napoleonem" (though she later sent a petition to this same Napoleon¹⁶), and that as a result, denunciations rained down on her from all sides, causing poor Marianne more and more anxiety.¹⁷

Whatever may have sparked village gossip, there was some, and it soon reached the ears of the rector of the departmental Academy, M. Fayet. The primary-school inspector, M. Henry, had given Louise a good rating: "This young woman deserves the respect of all decent people," though her school had struck him as being "neither particularly good, nor particularly bad." M. Fayet warned the young schoolmistress, however, that if the denunciations proved to be well-founded, she would have to answer to the academic council.

But M. Fayet and his wife were immediately charmed by Louise's engaging personality. "Her attitude is somewhat cavalier, but always very frank and entirely acceptable. It pleased us a great deal and often amused us. Indeed, her good-natured way of admitting her own flaws would have disarmed much more severe listeners than ourselves."¹⁸

Louise, in turn, very much enjoyed the Fayet's home, for they reminded her somewhat of her grandparents. Seated with them by the fireside, she would admit that the accusation *was*

well-founded, that she was a republican, that she wanted to continue her studies and hoped to go to Paris. His wife always took the young woman's side, though the rector himself tended to hesitate over his answers. Doves flitted through the sunlit rooms, exactly as in Vroncourt. "In their home, it always seemed to be a springtime morning."¹⁹

Louise confided in M. Fayet about more than her schoolroom difficulties. The French Academy was holding a poetry contest on the subject of "The Acropolis of Athens." Should she enter it? Did he know the conditions of the contest?²⁰ She also told him that her mother still occasionally talked about finding her a husband — "but I have no wish to get married." He answered, "No-one, not even your mother, has the right to impose his will upon you."²¹

Louise thanked the rector in grateful verse:

*Vous avez eu pour moi quelques mots d'espérance,
Vous avez compris que dans les nuits, parfois,
Le poète troublé par quelque songe immense
Laisse parler son rêve et met sans défiance
Son âme entière dans sa voix...*

*Merci, j'aurai toujours pour vous un chant de lyre,
Une prière au ciel, soit que les ouragans
Sur de lointaines mers balancent mon navire
Soit qu'il vogue, paisible, au souffle du zéphyr
Un reflet d'azur à ses flancs.*²²

M. Fayet thought her a great poet, an opinion which we are not required to share.²³

Following these discussions with M. Fayet, Louise spent two days in Chaumont "on business." She went to M. Sucot's bookstore, which received all the latest works from Paris and accordingly kept her forever in debt.²⁴ She visited her own former teachers and some friends as well. One of those friends was a certain Clara, who shared her love of practical jokes. Together, they'd go about drawing donkeys' ears in red chalk on the doors of "horrible people." This greatly upset the sober-minded citizens of Chaumont, who interpreted these mysterious markings either as the egalitarian triangle, or as the sign of some unknown instrument of torture.²⁵ The two friends would then giggle like schoolchildren (or nuns). Louise never lost this love of mischief.

She soon became involved in something much more serious than the donkeys'-ears escapade, something that might have

had really unpleasant repercussions but for the benevolence of the prefect, M. Froidefond. (He already knew her, as we have seen, though this fact is omitted in the *Mémoires*.) According to Louise, and we must take this version with a grain of salt, the trouble began when the Chaumont newspaper published a story of hers about a martyr, which began as follows: "During Domitian's reign, philosophers and scholars were banished, the pay of the praetorian guard was increased, gladiatorial combat re-established and everybody adored their gentle emperor, even as they waited patiently for someone to stab him. For some, the grand finale, the apotheosis, had already happened; for others, it was yet to come. That is all. The setting is Rome, 95 A.D."²⁶

The prefect read in this story an insult to Napoleon III and called Louise to his office. "But for your youth, we could justifiably deport you to Cayenne."* (Louise, of course, was not as young as he thought; by then she was at least twenty-four.)

"I replied that those who thought they recognized Bonaparte in my portrait of Domitian were as guilty of insulting him as I was, but that yes, I had had him in mind." She then claims to have added that she would enjoy setting up a school in Cayenne and since she couldn't afford to pay for such a trip herself, she would happily accept any offer to send her there.²⁷

This anecdote is very much in keeping with the woman that Louise was to become, but much less probable in the young lady praised by M. Fayet as being "irreproachable from a moral, religious and social point of view."

Louise got away with a simple reprimand, but the incident had unexpected consequences in the village. People learned that Mlle Michel had been called in to the prefect's office. What an honour! A man soon came to the schoolmistress, asking her to speak to the prefect on his behalf. Louise explained that the prefect had spent his time threatening to deport her to Cayenne, but the man would not be swayed. Finally, she agreed to send a letter and this (as later rewritten by memory) is what she said: "*Monsieur le préfet*, the person to whom you so kindly promised a trip to Cayenne has been hounded into sending you a letter of recommendation on behalf of M. X... He's as stubborn as a mule; I can't make him understand that

* the capital of French Guiana and for many years the centre of French penal settlement in Guiana — *transl. note*

a letter from me is the best way there is to get himself kicked out of your office. Let him learn through his own experience that I was right to refuse. I beg you, *monsieur le préfet*, not to forget the little matter of the voyage which we were discussing..."²⁸

This letter fits so well with all the rest of Louise's reconstruction of history that one really must question its authenticity. Yet it seems that the good man finally received what he wanted from the prefect and came back to thank Louise for her help. If that is so, one must conclude that the prefect had a fine sense of humour.

After one year in Audeloncourt, Louise received a post in Paris as an assistant teacher (thanks to M. Fayet) and so closed down her village school. But in a few months' time, her mother fell ill and Louise returned to Audeloncourt. The *Mémoires* contains no mention at all of this brief stay in Paris; it came to light only because her request to reopen her old village school has survived the years. She wrote the mayor on November 3, 1854 and the prefect one day later: "Dear Sir, having been obliged to leave Paris, where the rector of Haute-Marne had so kindly obtained me employment, in order to be near my ailing mother, and being unable either to leave her in her present state or to remain any longer without employment, I have the honour to inform you of my intention to reopen the private school for girls which I ran in this village last winter. I wrote the mayor of Audeloncourt to this effect on November 3, promising not to admit to my school any children presently enrolled in the Audeloncourt primary school, in order to avoid and discution [*sic*]." ²⁹ This almost incoherent request was accompanied by a testimonial from the parish priest of Audeloncourt (who seemed quite unaware that Louise made her students leave the church during the prayers for Napoleon III): "Mademoiselle Louise Michel has conducted herself with perfect decorum ever since her arrival in Audeloncourt."³⁰ The mayor also testified to her "excellent conduct."³¹ M. Fayet himself supported Louise's request: "Mademoiselle Michel is better endowed with imagination than with judgment, but she is an honest woman and I see no reason to oppose her reopening the school which she recently closed in order to take up a position as an assistant teacher in a Paris residential school."³²

One month later, however, Louise realized she had no students left, for "they had all been enrolled in the elementary

school." On December 3, 1854, therefore, she asked permission to open another private school, this time in Clefmont, "finding this more advantageous from every point of view." She made the required declaration to the inspector once again and once again, M. Fayet "readily agreed."³³ But Louise did not stay long in Clefmont either. In the fall of 1855, Julie Longchamp, who had become a friend of Louise's in Chaumont, requested permission to open a school in Millières.³⁴ Louise spent two years working with her there, leaving behind her nothing but "good memories" among the townspeople, though they sometimes felt she had her head "a bit in the clouds."³⁵

The few poems from that period which managed to survive the subsequent prudent destruction suggest a dreamy, idealistic woman, the target for a certain amount of village gossip and worried about her future:

*Je suis le lion mourant, superbe et solitaire,
Que le chasseur poursuit jusque sur son rocher.
Je suis le lys brisé que, de leur pied vulgaire
Foulent la chèvre errante et l'ignorant berger...³⁶*

She stood out from those around her, she wasn't like them and, in her loneliness and despair, called out to Victor Hugo:

*Qui donc sera mon guide? Est-ce Mozart ou toi?
Je veux voir par-delà les routes de la terre
Si, dans quelque phalange, il y a place pour moi...³⁷*

She left once again. Why did she do this, when turning her back on the village schools of Haute-Marne also meant deserting the mother she loved so dearly? "It hurt me a great deal," she wrote, "to leave them [her mother and grandmother] alone. But I still hoped that I would be able to provide them with a comfortable future."³⁸ Yet Marianne would have been perfectly content to live out her days in a quiet village, taking care of the housekeeping while Louise taught school. Louise must have had other motives than "a comfortable future" for her mother; it's just that she always liked to present herself as being much more single-minded than she really was. Probably, she was tired of a mediocre and apparently pointless existence, playing the role of local muse, caught up whether she liked it or not with small-town gossip which, "though it was not serious [says M. Fayet] must have tortured her nonetheless."³⁹ Her passionate soul felt it was called to different battles, worthy of a different fate. It really didn't matter how the adventure might turn out, she was off to Paris. It called her as it called every

provincial who wanted to change his life — or change life itself: from Julian Sorel to Rastignac, Pauline Roland to George Sand. Paris took your measure, and you won or you lost on the grand scale.

For schoolmistress Mlle Michel, it was a second chance to risk all, to become the woman she had it in her to become.

Mais pour moi, je m'en vais sans crainte dans l'espace.

Où? Je l'ignore encore. Je cherche le chemin.

Si, dans le grand désert, nul voyageur ne passe

*Qu'importe: j'irai seule à la voix du destin.*⁴⁰

As understanding as ever of this strange young woman, M. Fayet gave her a letter of introduction to a Paris school inspector. She wrote him in reply: "Once again, I am torn from the tranquil life and thrown into stormy seas without plans or resources. But I have courage, youth and infinite faith in God."⁴¹

III - THE GROWTH OF LOUISE MICHEL

And so, with this as her armour and with the recommendation of M. Fayet, Louise found herself a position as assistant schoolmistress in a *pension* run by Mme Vollier, at 14 Rue du Château-d'Eau. For once, Louise thanked M. Fayet in prose: "Thanks to you, I am doing very well. Your protection and that of your wife have brought me luck."¹ She had just been joined by her friend Julie Longchamp, with whom she had run the school in Millières.² The "Vollier girls," as they were called, dressed like sisters and Mme Vollier insisted that they be well turned out, so as to be a credit to her institution. Louise Michel describes one of her outfits (which is most unusual, for she wasted little breath on such frivolous subjects): a white crêpe hat decorated with daisy clusters, a dress of black grenadine and a lace shawl. All this cost her less than one might think, thanks to the Marché du Temple, which obligingly sold clothes on the strength of promissory notes.³ (Credit is not an invention of the twentieth century!) The rest of Louise's money (which consisted of the small sums that poor old Marianne could send her from time to time) went for music and books.

Two of Louise's cousins were also teachers, one at Putreaux and the other at La Chapelle. "There was no situation in which one would have had less money, but no situation in which one needed less money either. We were really quite Bohemian."⁴ Some "literary ladies" in their circle lived even more precariously than that. But they laughed at it all when

they got together Thursday evenings, over steaming cups of coffee.⁵

Marianne, however, wasn't laughing. Respectable country folk kept telling her that her daughter would never earn a living, that a teacher earned less than a cook, that she shouldn't send Louise any more money, *et cetera*. To reassure her, Mme Vollier, Julie and Louise decided to form a partnership. The resulting contract, in all its solemn legal splendour, was then sent to Marianne and managed to still the malicious tongues.⁶ Yet it was a short-lived partnership. Julie Longchamp received a small sum of money from her family, which she used to establish a school in the outlying district of Saint-Antoine. Louise chose not to follow her friend (who was young) and stayed instead with Mme Vollier (who was old and needed her help). She did, however, give music lessons every Thursday evening at Julie's school.⁷

All this left little time for holidays — a mere eight days a year. Marianne came to Paris to see her daughter and quickly became close friends with Mme Vollier. What she saw hardly reassured her about her daughter's "future." One day, for example, the old ladies were presented with a promissory note which Louise had signed for some books. Mme Vollier paid the note out of her rent money and Marianne immediately reimbursed her. She did, however, point out to her daughter that these impulsive purchases caused her real sacrifice. "So I stopped buying books for a long time, but it was very hard. There were always so many publications to tempt me."⁸ This cavalier approach to money, which people have always admired in Louise Michel, is undoubtedly a virtue — as long as it has no unfortunate repercussions on others. Louise claimed that she moved to Paris so as to guarantee her mother's old age, but in fact she always remained at least partially dependent on the old woman. Saints and revolutionaries do have their awkward side... In 1865, Marianne sold all her remaining Demahis land except for one small vineyard, and with the proceeds purchased a private day-school for Louise at 5 Rue des Cloys.⁹

Louise was absolutely delighted and shared her joy with M. Fayet: "Allow me to inform you of my great happiness in finally managing to buy a school. I think it is the regard which you have always shown towards me that has brought me this good fortune. I believe that you will be pleased by this news."¹⁰

Mme Vollier, who had been assured a small income by her sons, came with Louise to set up the new school. The number of students slowly grew and they were "quite well-provided with teachers."¹¹ But then Mme Vollier died of apoplexy and Caroline Lhomme — an ex-schoolmistress who had taught "all Montmartre" to read, now old, frail, seeking refuge — came to join Louise, bringing with her some additional students.¹² In 1868, near the end of the Empire, Louise opened another school at 24 Rue Oudot. This time her companion was a Mlle Poulin, another human derelict, ravaged by chronic chest disease, who then stayed with Louise until she died.¹³

Such goodness and charity was typical of Louise. She taught lessons in her school, gave extra classes, yet always found time to read to the blind, visit the sick, ask alms for the poor. "She had an irresistible way of putting things, and she'd underline her words with a reproachful look from her great soft eyes," said one of her colleagues who, in later years, was to criticize her very severely. She herself lived on nothing, but her friends could still complain of her endless raids on their pocket-books. Whenever she was given a bit of money, there was always some "highway robber" or "slut" hovering nearby to relieve her of it.¹⁴ When people told her that her protégés hardly deserved the effort she made on their behalf, she would reply, "If they cheat me, that's too bad for them."¹⁵

Her pupils loved her. They'd scamper around their teacher, "squealing, shouting, hanging on her tattered old dress, adoring her and adored in return,"¹⁶ as Clemenceau* was to write a little later on. It was a strange school anyway, this school of Louise's, with its white mice, its tortoise, its grass snake and its beds of moss.¹⁷ "I can't say it was entirely *proper*, as the Sorbonne understands the word," Clemenceau also wrote. "It was something of a free-for-all, with some highly unusual teaching methods but, taking everything into account, you had to agree that instruction was being offered."¹⁸

For Louise, however, it wasn't enough to give basic education to the children who came to her, using methods of her own invention (some of which have since been adopted in modern pedagogy). Her pity reached out to the abnormal as well.

* Georges Clemenceau (1841 - 1929); physician, journalist, radical Republican; elected to the National Assembly on February 5, 1871; mayor of the eighteenth arrondissement; twice prime minister of France (1906 - 1909 and 1917 - 1919)

— *transl. note*

She believed they could be educated, she believed teachers could hope to awaken a flicker of intelligence in their minds. In 1861, she published an extraordinary little booklet for its time: *Lueurs dans l'ombre: plus d'idiots, plus de fous*.^{*19} The text was in fact only a preface and she had to pay publication costs herself. She dedicated it to her mother ("May these pages bring her the sweetest of memories"), Adèle Esquiros ("who brought me hope, when my soul was filled with death and darkness") and Mme Vollier ("as testimony to my respect and affection"). And then, so as to include all those whom she loved, she quoted several verses from Victor Hugo:

*Je suis celui que rien n'arrête
Celui qui va
Celui dont l'âme est toujours prête
A Jéhovah.*

After which she modestly quoted from her own poetry, setting up a kind of duet with her beloved master:

*Moi, je suis la blanche colombe
Du noir arceau
Qui pour l'arche à travers la tombe
Cherche un rameau.*

All in all, a strange beginning for an essay on pedagogy and remedial training. In fact, the essay was nothing of the sort, it was really a lyric poem expressing her opinions of the time: "Do you hear the distant thunder of horses' hooves through the brooding night?... Do you see the banners being unfurled? Is it a road or is it a ship's sail, gleaming white on the far horizon?... Revolutions are now being moulded in the mysterious crucibles of the infinite..." Louise was already dreaming of revolutions, but vague as they were, they were definitely still spiritual in nature. Latter-day Prometheuses would steal fire from the heavens, not in defiance of God "but clothed in the very splendour of God." The heavenly fire was still the thoroughly Christian one of faith, hope and charity. Louise had a quasi-mystic vision of it all: the city of God would open its doors and the world would lay down its weapons to march, in peace, to a single goal: "the beautiful, the magnificent, under the eyes of God." Dreamers are poets, poets are prophets (here an implicit tribute to Hugo) and so it is

* "Light Among the Shadows: No More Idiots and No More Madmen — *transl. note*

poets who are destined to open the gates to the future. Yet all this does not take us as far from her supposed subject as one might think. Louise was still a dualist and spiritualist,* and so her pamphlet argues that the soul, breath of God, is capable of influencing other souls through its strength, will, intelligence and love. By these virtues, the soul may "heal the idiots and madmen." One must seek patiently to exercise the "paralyzed intelligence of the idiot." In the case of the madman, "his soul pursues his reason, which flees before it." One must try "every approach," by every means possible: science, research, devotion and, above all, "faith in mankind." She spoke of the "sciences" so admired by Balzac, phrenology and magnetism. One must first teach the idiots and the insane "to see, to feel, to desire" and then lead them to the power of reason. This schoolteacher of 1861 could hardly imagine psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, but nonetheless it was a flash of genius (and she often had such flashes) which made her refuse to abandon the mentally ill to their misery and instead insist that they could be helped. There was a precondition, however (and here she falls back into her mysticism): those who would undertake this task must "have seen the splendour of the triangle of fire; they must believe it, breathe it and love it."

Her words were so striking, her conviction so complete, that she managed to enlist a few other teachers in this crusade. As the witness* to these undocumented years (whom we have already quoted) put it: "She so bewitched us that we set up a loose sort of association and gave our spare time to the education of the idiots."²⁰

To teach the young, help the poor, care for the sick, read to the blind, seek to awaken the souls of "idiots and madmen" — all this would have been quite enough activity for a woman of more limited, and less varied, possibilities. Louise, however, continued to write. For her, poetry was almost a biological necessity, a catharsis. In this she was truly a poet and would remain one all her life, though surely her life itself was the best of all her poems. Sometimes, she would turn a melancholy eye (the other side of Louise Michel) on the

* in the specific sense of the philosophic doctrine which holds that spirit exists independently of matter (thus, the opposite of materialism, the philosophy that she was later to adopt) — *transl. note*

* a M. Chincholle, later journalist with *Le Figaro* and her "devoted enemy" — *transl. note*

accumulated pages: "I open my old notebooks at random. How many songs have disappeared, how many tears been shed, how many hopes extinguished..."²¹ Like all women, she pondered love, the great love which still eluded her, for she had met no man worthy of the term:

*Oui, si j'aimais d'amour, ce ne serait que Dieu
Ou le démon rebelle, ange aux regards de feu
Dont le front resplendit de flammes et d'étoiles...*²²

She was much less selective with her poetry than her love. She sent verses to *Le Journal de la Jeunesse*, *La Soeur de Charité*, which was run by Adèle Esquiros, and *La Raison*, run by Adèle Caldelar, using variously the names Louise Michel, Louis Michel and Enjolras (in tribute to Victor Hugo).²³ "And I very seldom knew which ones were published."²⁴ This apparent detachment, however, was probably more pose than reality. She was, after all, as of January 25, 1862, a member of the Union of Poets, a society of mutual help and encouragement ("Let us help each other"), whose aim was to "illuminate all poetic talents" ("Strength Through Unity").²⁵

Using her pseudonym of Enjolras, Louise joined the Literary Alliance and took part in the quarrel which set Alexandre Dumas against the Baron Sirtema de Grovestins. This little-known Baron, obscure author of historical and diplomatic studies, had published a work under the banner of the Literary Alliance, entitled, *Les Gloires du romantisme appréciées par leurs contemporains et recueillies par un autre bénédictin*.^{*} The Baron, obsessed with genealogy and family honour, attacked Alexandre Dumas for his ancestor "of the black race" and for the illegitimate birth of his father, himself and his son. Such was the level of this purported "literary" critique. Enjolras took offence: herself a member of the Literary Alliance, she wished to dissociate herself from such "infamy." In October 1862, she made her position clear, so clear that "it would be impossible to establish the slightest convergence between my literary sentiments and those of the Baron Sirtema de Grovestins."²⁶

Let us try to establish a bit of order in Louise's flood of poetry — and acknowledge that in so doing we are untrue to Louise, for whom disorder was life itself and who claimed not

* "The Glories of Romanticism, Appreciated by Their Contemporaries and Collected by Another Worthy Scholar" — *transl. note*

even to know which of her efforts were ever published. And she was, indeed, to “forget” many verses over the years, thanks to her habit of systematically omitting those things which later became inconvenient.

We may start with a March 1858 poem, a surprising work for the republican she later claimed already to have been at this date. It was a petition to the Emperor on behalf of Orsini* and his fellow conspirators. True, it is the role of the poet to beg mercy, and her master Hugo had often done so without suffering loss of public esteem. But Louise went so far as to offer her prayers for the Bonaparte dynasty!

She sent this poem to a certain “monsieur” whom she believed in a position to present it to Napoleon III himself. The idea of winning pardon for Orsini was “an obsession.” The image of his torments overwhelmed her, “raised a storm in my soul.”

*Miséricorde. Sire! Oh, quel que soit le crime,
Le pardon est si beau...*

To grant pardon “is almost to be God.” She asked this favour in the name of the Emperor’s own son:

*Grâce au nom de cet ange assis sur votre trône,
Au nom de cet enfant que Dieu vous a donné.
Grâce, afin qu’à son tour, il porte la couronne...*

Having appealed to the earthly angel, Louise then invoked the celestial ones:

*Les anges se diraient en se voilant la face:
Pourquoi ce sang encore en France répandu...*

Yes, the crime was grave, but the wait for death even more cruel: visions of the scaffold, hideous phantoms, the waiting hangman, the jeering mob. Grant pardon, that God may give “to France, peace, and to the world, tranquility” and that the Napoleonic dynasty may continue:

*Grâce afin qu’à vos fils passe votre couronne
Que l’ombre de la Croix protège leurs tombeaux.*

She omits nothing, not even the death of Bishop Sibour:

Qu la religion protège la patrie...²⁷

It is not known if this exhortation ever reached the Emperor. Even if it did, it was in vain. Louise was later to “forget” this petition, along with her poem on the death of

* Felice Orsini (1819 - 58), who made an unsuccessful attempt on Napoleon III’s life in 1858 — *transl. note*

Bishop Sibour, and many others of the same stripe.

One that she did continue to acknowledge in later years was a naive little ode to the swallows, the pleasant sort of verse a young girl might compose when not busy with her lacework:

Hirondelle aux yeux noir, hirondelle, je t'aime.

Je ne sais quel écho par toi m'est apporté

Des rivages lointains: pour vivre, loi suprême,

*Il me faut comme à toi, l'air et la liberté.*²⁸

Ravens and wolves were also part of her bestiary. Ravens, which feed on carrion, were less pleasant than swallows, but they were "pure" and they too brought "liberty."²⁹

She followed this theme of liberty through history. It was the story of Marcus Curtius (these French republicans knew their Roman history very well), the patrician who leapt fully armed and on horseback into a chasm with the cry, "Long live the Republic!"^{* 30}

It was the story of Rouget de Lisle:^{**}

Cette voix, c'est la Marseillaise,

Bouche d'airain, souffle de feu,

La Révolution française

*Qui frémit et gronde en tout lieu.*³¹

And above all, it was Saint-Just:

Ombre d'un citoyen, Saint-Just, je te salue.

Viens, frère, parle-moi. L'heure est-elle venue?

Les Pharaons vont-ils tomber?

Liberty and honour had disappeared. This "ardent people" had taken an adventurer as their master. All was quiet, all kept quiet, yet she could see the marching cohorts of revolutionaries gathering in the shadows. And one of them held out to her "his pale hands":

Tous deux nous paraissions à peu près du même âge,

Et soit que ce fut l'âme, ou l'air, ou le visage,

Ses traits étaient pareils aux miens...

And Saint-Just asked her:

Entends-tu dans la nuit cette voix qui t'appelle,

*Ecoute, l'heure sonne, viens...*³²

This kindred soul, this brother, this lover for whom Louise

* according to legend, a chasm opened up in the Forum in 362 B.C. It would not close, said the seers, until Rome's most precious possession had been thrown into it. Curtius, reasoning that "nothing is more precious than a brave citizen," threw himself in, and the gulf promptly closed

** Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle (1760 - 1836): French army officer and author of the "Marseillaise" — *transl. notes*

yearned, could not be the good bourgeois of Haute-Marne who had earlier asked her hand in marriage, or the officer who later risked the same question (she apparently replied that she had sworn never to marry but, sacrifice for sacrifice, she would indeed marry him as soon as he had killed the Emperor³³), or even Hugo himself. She thought, however, that she had been granted a glimpse of this elusive worthy lover in a sort of premonition, and so she awaited his arrival. Who would be her own Saint-Just? She still didn't know, but it was inevitable that she would discover him one day, cause him to be born, invent him.

For Louise, the revolution was not simply memories of the past. It was a universal and continuous source of action. Slaves rebelled in the United States, and she wrote, "Les Noirs devant le gibet de John Brown":

*Frères, il est donc vrai, la guerre est déclarée,
Venez... 34*

Italy was in turmoil; she wrote "A Garibaldi."³⁵ Poland crushed, she wrote "Serment au Peuple." As long as her voice could last, "may she cry to you, O Liberty."³⁶

But misery was right here as well, on our own doorstep, and we knew nothing of it: "Les Ouvriers de Rouen."³⁷ Criminals strike, but "we let the victims die." What had become of the word "fraternity"? A year ago, we didn't know the workers were dying of hunger in Rouen, but now we knew. She described the children searching for food in the frozen fields, dying of cold and hunger as they scabbled the earth. Louise could never ignore such suffering. Just as in Vroncourt, she now called not for the distant Revolution, but for immediate charity:

*Donnons sans balancer, donnons jusqu'à nos âmes,
...on tue en hésitant.*

And there was misery in Paris itself. She wrote in "Les Misères"³⁸ of the old people "who have no hope and no home," of the scarecrow woman in the doorway, scavenging garbage that a dog would refuse (the prostitution theme):

*... Oh, n'est-il donc personne
Qui s'en aille sans cesse, et la nuit, et le jour,
A l'heure où paraît l'aube, à l'heure où minuit sonne,
Relevant, consolant le pauvre avec amour...*

But alms alone cannot counter famine, war, plague, the eternal scourges of mankind. There must be fraternity among all men:

*Que sont tous ces palais élevés sur les sables?
Pourquoi ces hautes tours à des Babels semblables?
Hommes, aimons l'humanité...*

Louise continued to send verses to the great poet who, from his rock,* ceaselessly raged against Little Napoleon:

*Voyez-vous dans la brume un rocher couvert d'ombre,
C'est là qu'est le maître exilé,
Mais par lui, dans la nuit, des visions sans nombre
Montrent l'avenir étoilé.*³⁹

For Victor Hugo, in the eyes of all republicans, was the living symbol of resistance to the Empire.

While he received many of her poems, most of them went elsewhere and *those* verses, she tells us, were "undoubtedly the best, for they were full of anger and indignation. They probably ended up in M. Bonaparte's wastebaskets... The curses that I have sent him!"⁴⁰ For example, this "Marseillaise Noire" which she threw into the Imperial letterbox on July 14. I found a draft copy among her personal papers:⁴¹

*La nuit est courte et fugitive.
En avant, tenons-nous les mains,
Garde à toi, citoyen! Qui vive?
Républicain, Républicain...*

And then, there was this song to Mme Bonaparte, a collective composition by Louise, Vermorel and some others, which consisted of a litany of insults, put to the tune of the familiar "Marlborough":

*Gueuses, Robert-Macaire, **
Mironton (etc.),
Vendus et tripoteurs...*⁴²

By now, you understand, Louise had forgotten all about her petition on behalf of Orsini...

In the midst of all this constant exaltation and high tension, the climate in which she best liked to live, Louise still found time for moments of relaxation. Above all, music. While still assistant-schoolmistress to Mme Vollier, she had sung in church, and the organ and choir gave her "the sensation of angels' wings beating in the nave."⁴³

But after those angels came the demons. Louise wrote "Un Rêve des sabbats" one Sunday afternoon, giving her imagina-

* Hugo was still in exile in the Channel Islands.

** Robert-Macaire was the archetypal highwayman, from *L'Auberge des Adrets* — transl. notes

tion free rein since she knew this opera (words and music) would never see the light of day. It was as romance as Louise herself. It had a bleak setting: Satan atop a Paris church, the rest of the city engulfed in lava. Satan and Don Juan had fallen in love with the same "druidess" and their rivalry set off an apocalyptic war. One after another, all of Louise's favourite characters from history, literature and legend made their appearances on stage. The war ended with the destruction of the world and the return of the "spirits" to the elemental forces of nature, whose chorus could be heard through the deep night, lit only by sudden flashes of lightning. The infernal beat of the orchestra died away; one after another, the instruments fell silent. A harp shivered its last notes into the silence. Louise threw every possible instrument into her imaginary orchestra: harps, lyres, flutes, bugles, guitars, a harmonica and even a cannon. And she saw her gigantic orchestra playing in the folds of a mountain range, with the audience gathered in the valley below.

The grandmother of one of her students, who happened to arrive in the midst of all this, was appalled by the deliberate cacophony: "The worst of it is, some of this is very well done," she said. "But you can only permit yourself such fantasies if you're rich and famous." Replied Louise, "Then I'll remain a schoolteacher..."⁴⁴

Short annual vacations took her to Haute-Marne, to her mother and grandmother, who were delighted to have a visit from the prodigal daughter. In 1864, Louise used her holiday-time to take up cudgels on behalf of a family by the name of Bonnet, from Varennes-sur-Amance, which couldn't afford to press its claim to an inheritance. She wrote a lawyer, asking that he take up the case: "Would you please put your wonderful talents at the service of these unfortunate people?" She then sent him all the necessary documentation. "Justice for this family will enrich the whole country, and the whole country will thank you for your efforts."⁴⁵

The following year, she brought with her a young girl of sixteen or seventeen years of age, Victorine Louvet, who was then preparing for her school examinations. (She later married Eudes, a Blanquist, and fought for the Commune against Versailles.) Louise took Victorine for a walk in the woods, showed her the old chateau and the sacred "Oak of the Oaths." One day, in the Thal forest, a wolf followed them during their

entire walk — real wolf, imaginary wolf, with Louise one doesn't know and it doesn't matter, the wolf was always an important member of her bestiary. Whatever he was, this primordial wolf inspired her to compose the "Légende du chêne" for the fascinated Victorine. A druidess (yet again),

*Debout sous le grand chêne
Sous le grand chêne de trente ans.
Des rameaux de rouge verveine
Enlacent ses cheveux flottants.*

The bards sang, the wise men of the tribe "spread their sacred cloths"; a white bull, sacrificed, died with a groan. This was a sinister omen: the gods then demanded human sacrifice, voluntary sacrifice, such as that once made by the patrician Curtius. The martyr theme:

*Qui donc te fit, ô mort sanglante,
Mort des martyrs, le plus beau sort...*

The druidess tapped with her golden rod a handsome youth, who offered himself to the slaughter, and then killed herself.⁴⁶

Legendary Gaul, the Gaul of little shaggy men who dared resist Caesar's might, was another of Louise's favourite themes⁴⁷...along with storms, winds, oceans, wolves, combat, tempest, martyrdom and other such cataclysms. But her "asterix complex" brought her full circle, back to her own day and the Caesar then reigning over France:

*O nos pères, fiers et sauvages
Bien lourd est donc votre sommeil,
Pères, n'est-il plus de présages,
N'avons-nous plus de sang vermeil?*⁴⁸

In the ancient forests, on the pathways of Vercingetorix,* Louise pursued a single dream: the war of the weak against the strong, the poor against the rich, the powerless against the powerful. This war, which she found among the pavingstones of her own Paris as well as in the timeless forests of Lorraine, was to lead, eventually, to a dazzling future of love and peace among truly fraternal human beings.

What turned Louise into a revolutionary and, despite her childhood religious devotion, a materialist and atheist? Long mutations of this sort are hard to trace, and her *Mémoires* offer

* Gaulish chieftain and leader of the unsuccessful revolt in 52 B.C. against Caesar's Roman troops; taken to Rome and put to death, 46 B.C. — *transl. note*

us no dependable help in the search. Louise, as we've already noted, insisted that she was republican and revolutionary right from childhood, conveniently ignoring the years of her Catholic, royalist and Bonapartist poetry. So we must discount her testimony.

For example, her 1858 petition to Napoleon III on behalf of Orsini contained prayers for his dynasty and used the imagery of Catholic mythology (angels). In 1861, she was still spiritualist, in Hugo's style, when she wrote *Plus d'idiots, plus de fous*. Was she ever a true believer of the Catholic faith? It really seems that, for her, it was largely a matter of emotions and aesthetics. When she sang in church, she was transported by the incense, the candles and the sacred music of the *Tantum Ergo* or the *Regina Coeli*. And then, "there was a long period of time when I no longer believed, or was at least aware that those who doubt no longer believe."⁴⁹

She began to take the courses being offered working people on Rue Hautefeuille by republicans such as Jule Favre (whom she loved "like a father") and Eugène Pelletan, to whom she sent her enormous manuscript, *La Sagesse d'un fou*. He even managed to wade through it, and then wrote in the margin, "No, not the wisdom of a fool; some day it will be the wisdom of the people."⁵⁰

She was greatly influenced by Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and Claude Bernard's *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale*. Young (female) teachers flocked to these course, "avid for the knowledge which women may acquire only by stealth." They seized "these scraps of science and liberty... We were possessed by a rage for knowledge." They studied physics, chemistry, law and stenography (which was then relatively unknown). A few young women "rather half-heartedly," prepared for the baccalaureate examination which had just been opened up to them by the pioneering efforts of Julie Daubié. A recent and decidedly incomplete victory: the minister of Public Instruction had refused to award Julie the diploma to which she was entitled, for fear, poor man, of making his ministry ridiculous in the eyes of the (male) world. Louise began to study mathematics once again, and rediscovered her passion for algebra.⁵¹ "I'm working toward my baccalaureate," she wrote the worthy M. Fayet, "and I'm composing romances, songs and music as well. You can see that I practise every folly."⁵²

Happy and free to pursue their interests in their little world on Rue Hautefeuille, the young women seemed more like students themselves than the teachers that they were. Walking home from her courses late in the evening, Louise discovered a new scope for her love of practical jokes. Dressed in a long black cloak, a hat which hid her face and "new" boots from the Marché du Temple which made a great clatter on the pavement, she'd pick out some good bourgeois citizen and follow him down the street. In this ill-famed Paris of the Second Empire, he was sure to mistake her for a roving cut-throat...⁵³

One of the teachers on Rue Hautefeuille was a M. Francolin (nicknamed "Dr. Francolinus" by the students, who thought he looked like an alchemist of old). He chaired the Society for Elementary Education, and took a few of these teachers, Louise obviously among them, to the vocational school run by the Society on Rue Thévenot.⁵⁴ There the teachers, who themselves were receiving instruction on Rue Hautefeuille, turned around and offered it to others. Louise and Charles de Sivry (first friend and then brother-in-law to Verlaine*) taught drawing, literature and ancient geography. She became a student of Transformism, and took to describing the birth, youth and aging of cities and peoples as being "just like the life cycle of each individual human being and the human race as a whole."⁵⁵

The Rue Thévenot school also brought together the Women's Rights group, which was run by Mmes Jules Simon, André Léo and Maria Deraismes. Women's Rights demanded equal education for both sexes (an old cry) and adequate salaries for women so as to eliminate the necessity of prostitution.⁵⁶ Louise was at first shy, but then won Mme Jules Simon's approval with her sweetness. She was asked to give talks in every district of the city on employment for women. "It's not much, but it's the only help I can offer."⁵⁷

As well, Louise threw herself into the Second Empire's great quarrel about the role of women. On one side: the eternal anti-feminists, represented at this moment in history by Michelet, Emile de Girardin and, above all, Proudhon, who offered women nothing more than the celebrated choice between "housewife and courtesan" and who had such an unfortunate

* Paul Verlaine (1849 - 1906): French poet generally considered to be part of the Symbolist movement, though his own position on Symbolism was equivocal
— *transl. note*

influence on the French labour movement. On the other side: Jenny d'Héricourt (who wrote *La Femme affranchie* in 1860), Juliette Lamber (*Idées antiproudhoniennes sur l'amour, les femmes et le mariage*, 1861), André Léo who, widowed, had to support her two children with her pen (*Les Femmes et les mœurs*) and Maria Deraismes, whose calm and measured talks forced many a misogynist to admit that an intelligent, cultivated and even well-bred young lady could indeed speak in public without utterly dishonouring herself.⁵⁸

In 1861, Louise Michel published a reply to a certain "Junius" who, in *Le Figaro*, had taken a stand against women authors. Junius spoke in the name of "men of letters"; Louise replied in the name of "women of letters." She pointed to *Soeur de Charité*, the paper run by Adèle Esquiros, which had as its sole aim to serve justice and truth. Was that goal to be denied to women? "As far as this obscure bluestocking is concerned, I have never felt and have never known other female authors to feel anything but a keen desire to be useful." She criticized Michelet for reducing woman to her garden and her home where, the eternal child eternally frail, she was to spend her time being protected and cared for. "Fine gentlemen make of their wives an idol — and it's a poor enough idol, for the husband creates this idol in his own miserable image." According to Junius, men now regretted that they had ever allowed women to learn to read. "Well, I regret that those who think themselves strong attack those whom they think weak." But at least, let them make it open war, "let them stop fencing." ⁵⁹

Eight years later, Louise, who was demonstrably the most devoted of them all to the cause, became the secretary of the Democratic Society for Moralization. The society's goals were nothing short of revolutionary: it wanted to help make it possible for female workers to earn living wages. Accordingly, the members sought bread first but work right after, for "alms degrade, work ennobles." The society was not a normal commercial placement agency: every position was arranged free of charge. "We count on you, all you who do not wish the worker's daughter to submit to shame... May the People triumph!" Charter members of the society included, among others, other..... and Adèle Esquiros.⁶⁰

It would appear that Louise at this time was attracted not only to republicans like Jules Favre and Pelletan and to the

respectable women of Women's Rights, but to the International and the Blanquists as well. She may even have become a member of the International: she claimed as much before the Council of War but we must be wary of her testimony, for she was using that forum to accuse herself of every "sin" in the book. On the other hand, she does describe, with an intensity that suggests she knew it personally, the dusty stairway of the Corderie du Temple, where the International used to meet. It was, she said, like mounting the steps of a temple, "the temple of a free and peaceful world."⁶¹

She followed passionately every portent of the Empire's impending doom and attended a ceaseless round of meetings. The members of the Free Thought group met in a little jerry-built sort of hall, known as the Salle de la Marseillaise. There they talked about religion very little, but a great deal about the coming revolution. One day, a woman who was unknown to the group rose solemnly to announce, "If the men hang back when the time comes, women will lead the way. And I'll be there." People smirked. The woman was Louise Michel.⁶²

There were meetings outside the city as well. "The things we said as we walked home through the fields. Oh, those were happy times!"⁶³ (Happy times indeed. For those rural paths are now buried beneath concrete and asphalt, and as for those untarnished hopes for the revolution...)

Marianne came to live with her daughter in Paris after the death of her own mother, Marguerite.⁶⁴ She worried a great deal about the turn which Louise's life seemed to have taken. Louise kept trying to calm her, insisting that she wasn't involved in anything at all. One evening, two comrades came to call for her, but waited outside. "You can't possibly be going out to give lessons at this time of night," protested Marianne. "Julie has sent for me." Marianne went to the window. "I knew it. It's your meetings again."⁶⁵

The political situation nearly exploded when the journalist Victor Noir was assassinated by Pierre Bonaparte, a cousin of the Emperor. The Blanquists and the Montmartre revolutionaries went armed to the funeral. Louise had taken a sabre from her uncle in Lagny and, "dreaming of Harmodius,"* dressed in man's garb "in order neither to embarrass others nor to be

* an Athenian (d. 514 B.C.) who conspired against the tyrant Hippias — *transl. note*

embarrassed myself." They were sure the triumph of the long-sought Republic was imminent. But instead, the wisdom of the old republican Delescluze and the prudence of Rochefort* carried the day. The body of the Empire's latest victim was taken directly to the cemetery and the huge would-be funeral procession broke up, with only a few minor incidents. Varlin congratulated Delescluze and Rochefort for not having risked provoking a massacre. But the Blanquists and Louise Michel went home slump-shouldered in dejection.⁶⁶

Louise sent Léon Richier (editor of the paper, *Société du droit des femmes*) a number of articles on "women's rights," for women were demanding their right (and duty) "to take part in the country's period of mourning." These articles amounted to a solemn oath: a group of *citoyennes*, "of whom I have the honour to be one," had sworn on the tomb of Victor Noir "to wear mourning for the victim until justice be done." And indeed, for the rest of her life Louise never wore anything but black, since the dead of the Commune quickly succeeded the victims of the Empire. To this oath she attached two pieces of verse, entitled "Les Corbeaux" and "Le Champ de bataille," which she acknowledged having borrowed from Hugo. However, "the great poet is not one to take offence at trivial matters, or to fear a woman's rivalry."⁶⁷

Victor Noir's death inspired her to other furious poems as well:

*Bandits, êtres crépusculaires,
Mouchards, flibustiers, assassins
Passez sans vous laver les mains,
Fortifiez bien tous vos repaires...*

* Henri Rochefort, or, the Marquis Henri de Rochefort-Lucçay (1831 - 1913): impoverished nobleman turned radical extremist turned nationalist; a journalist, satirist, "muckraker" and, briefly, member of the Chamber of Deputies (under the Empire). His stormy career spanned the equally stormy years from the Second Empire to the First World War. As a young man, his concept of patriotism embraced republicanism, socialism and nationalism. As the years passed, however, he increasingly paid lip service to the first, and dropped the second in favour of the more bigoted variety of the third — he was closely identified, for example, with the Boulangist movement and, later, with the anti-Dreyfusards. His newspapers — most importantly, *L'Intransigeant* — veered with him. Yet he was also witty, charming, outspokenly contemptuous of authority all his life, the father of a long-lasting style of political journalism and, as we shall see, financially generous to Louise Michel to the day she died, even though she refused ever to endorse his later political stands — *Transl. note*

*Entassez bien crime sur crime.
Nous sommes là, nolis les vengeurs,
Nous maudissons les oppresseurs
Sur la tombe de la victime.⁶⁸*

Her curses notwithstanding, the Empire continued to reign.

IV - PARIS IS COLD, PARIS IS HUNGRY

The declaration of war by Napoleon III on Prussia (July 19, 1870) sharply divided public opinion. The army was ready "down to the last gaiter button,"* after all, so the war would be a mere — and brief — formality. The jingoistic Parisian crowds shouted "To Berlin!" and labelled everybody a traitor who disagreed. Rochefort's paper, *La Marseillaise*, opposed this storm of emotion, and had its presses smashed.¹ The French section of the International published an appeal to German workers: "Brothers of Germany, in the name of peace, do not listen to the vested interests and the lackeys who try to mislead you as to the true spirit of France... Divisions between us can only lead to the final triumph of despotism on both sides of the Rhine." Processions of students, Blanquists and Internationalists took to the streets to proclaim their opposition to the war, where they were promptly clubbed by the police. Louise went home from one such demonstration to write an anguished poem:

*Dans la nuit, on s'en va, marchant en longues files,
Le long des boulevards, disant la paix! la paix!
Et l'on se sent suivi par la meute servile,
Ton jour, ô liberté, ne viendra-t-il jamais?*

She accused Napoleon III of having declared war just to ensure his own dynastic survival:

* the famous — and false — boast made at the opening of the war by Marshal Leboeuf, then minister of War. Napoleon III was less starry-eyed: he went to the Front and promptly telegraphed his wife, "Nothing is ready." — *transl. note*

*Pour retarder un peu sa chute qui s'avance
Il lui faut des combats, dût la France y sombrer...*

And then, sound prophet, she predicted the fall of the regime:

*Maudit, de ton palais, sens-tu passer ces hommes?
C'est ta fin...*

Let the tyrant "draw his sword," let him drive the people as sheep "to the slaughter"; he would still fall. And, supporting the International's appeal for worker solidarity, she threw out her own challenge:

*Puisqu'on veut le combat, puisque l'on veut la guerre,
Peuples, le front courbé, plus tristes que la mort
C'est contre les tyrans qu'ensemble, il faut la faire.
Bonaparte et Guillaume auront le même sort.*²

It quickly became obvious that the men who had so ardently called for this war were incapable of waging it. French defeats followed one another in close succession: Froeschwiller and Woerth (August 6), Borny (August 14), Gravelotte (August 16), Saint-Privat (August 18). By August 14, the Blanquists believed the time was ripe to overthrow the Empire and so they tried to seize the La Villette barracks and its weapons. Utter failure. There was a demonstration the next day and Louise, of course, was there:

*Nous disions: "En avant! Vive la République!"
Tout Paris répondra, tout Paris soulevé,
Se souvenant enfin. Paris fier, héroïque
Dans son sang généreux de l'Empire lavé,
Voilà ce qu'on croyait; la ville fut muette...*³

Blanqui had managed to flee to Belgium, but Eudes and Brideau were arrested and subsequently sentenced to death by a Council of War. Michelet circulated a petition on their behalf, which was soon covered with signatures. Louise was one of those collecting names for it. Some of the more timid signatories tried subsequently to withdraw their names, but Louise refused to allow such cowardice.

Louise, Adèle Esquiros and André Léo were chosen to carry the petition to the governor of Paris, General Trochu, on the theory that a trio of women might have more impact. Especially *this* trio... They stormed their way into an antechamber, where they seated themselves upon a bench to await developments. "They thought they could simply ease us out the door!" Which only shows how little their adversaries knew the women who

confronted them and declared, with more than a hint of revolutionary jargon, that they had come "on behalf of the people" and that they were charged with placing the dossier in the hands of General Trochu himself. Finally, a man appeared who claimed to be the general's secretary, empowered to represent him in his absence. The three women finally agreed to hand over the petition to him, on condition that he officially sign for it.⁴ For Louise, this was only an opening skirmish with authority, but still one which had them "in fear of execution." The sought-after reprieve was granted, and signed on the very day of the French defeat at Sudan. Two days later, on September 4, the accumulated skein of military disasters finally toppled the Empire.

In the heady days which followed, Victor Hugo came home in triumph from exile. Louise Michel went to see him, this poet to whom she had so regularly sent her verses, the man whom long ago, in Vroncourt, she had claimed as a "kindred soul." Hugo's *Carnets intimes* for September 13 and 18 recorded visits by Louise Michel, adding the enigmatic code-letter "n" and the sentence, "an hour's ride with Enjolras, two francs fifty." This might mean the resumption of the sexual relations which had (perhaps) begun in 1851, or the first, furtive caresses between the poet and the fortyish spinster,⁵ or even her refusal: instead of "nude" (as M. Guillemin* believes), the letter "n" might have meant "no." Personally, I favour this last hypothesis, for I came across a message from Louise to Hugo, scribbled hastily in pencil and undated: "Dear Master, Enjolras begs your forgiveness for his rudeness both yesterday and today. But I can still send you a letter, anyone has that right, I as much as another citizen. Master, are you very angry with me? Enjolras."⁶ But then, this little spat could have been caused by a number of other things as well. We shall probably never know the truth of the relations between Louise and Hugo. We do know, however, that their correspondence continued without interruption until 1880.

Meanwhile, the war continued, history continued, and those events pushed Louise's sentimental life well into the background — a life which, in any event, she took great pains to conceal and which therefore poses such a challenge for the conscientious biographer.

Louise exulted at the end of Empire:

* see transl. note p. 28

*Amis, l'on a la République.
Le sombre passé va finir.
Debout tous, c'est l'heure héroïque
Fort est celui qui sait mourir.*⁷

Again, the theme of martyrdom. However, the day on which Jules Favre embraced Louise Michel, Théophile Ferré and Rigault on the steps of City Hall, calling them all his "dear children,"⁸ was also a day of hope that all those who had yearned for the Republic during the years of Empire would now unite in one common endeavour.

However, it was soon obvious that this was not to happen. The men who took power on September 4 belonged to the bourgeoisie, and found themselves caught between two equally formidable enemies: on one side, the Prussians and, on the other, the Paris workers who wanted not just the outer form of republic but its true, social content as well.

Strasbourg had been under siege since August 13 and, on August 18, was still holding out. A few women — and one can safely guess that Louise Michel was their "ringleader"* — decided to demand weapons at City Hall and then to try to break out of Paris, reach Strasbourg and either help defend her or die in the attempt. The idea was probably pure madness. In any event, it was dismissed as such by the politicians and the military, who seemed to wear their defeats very lightly indeed.

But the women persevered. A small group headed for City Hall, crying "To Strasbourg!" They were joined along the way by young people (mostly students) and other women (mostly teachers). They gathered at the feet of the Strasbourg statue, opened a register and invited people to sign up. They then sent André Léo and Louise Michel to City Hall, to demand weapons for their volunteers. The women were politely received and then shut up in a small room which already held two other prisoners: one a student and the other an old woman, who had gone to the grocer's for some oil and hadn't the slightest idea what "crime" she was supposed to have committed. Some three or four hours later, a colonel — "Regular and stupid features, square shoulders, square body, a shining example of a colonel" — came to interrogate them. Louise Michel and André Léo refused to answer any questions until the old woman had been freed.

* let us note, however, that experts agree ringleaders can only succeed to the extent they express and channel the common will — *author's note*

The Colonel couldn't make head nor tail of this business of volunteers and weapons for Strasbourg: "What do you care if Strasbourg falls? *You* aren't there..." Finally, a member of the government appeared on the scene, and had the student and the two women released.⁹

But there continued to be daily demonstrations before the statue, for Strasbourg was dear to the Parisian heart. On October 2, Louise called on the city's nurses and the female members of the Free Thought group to go once again to the Strasbourg statue and from there to City Hall. This time, however, they wouldn't demand arms but would merely express the hope that the French armies then being formed in the provinces would be marched as quickly as possible to Strasbourg in an effort to relieve the city.¹⁰ Were these two demonstrations in fact one and the same? If so, Louise Michel was mistaken about the date, which is not very important, but about the purpose of the demonstration as well, and was guilty of dramatizing it in her usual fashion. It is much more touching to demand arms and a chance to "get through" than simply to ask that an army be dispatched to the beleaguered city.

In Paris, which had itself been under siege since September 19, Louise practised her marksmanship out at the fairgrounds. She became quite an accomplished shot, as was to be demonstrated later on.¹¹ But she didn't spend all her time with a rifle. Her life, as usual, raced on in a multitude of directions at once.

She continued as best she could to take care of her students on Rue Oudot. There were now some two hundred girls, between the ages of six and twelve, whom Louise Michel instructed with the help of an assistant schoolmistress, Malvina Poulain. The school also served as an asylum for children from three to six years of age, whose parents had come as refugees from the countryside to Paris before Paris itself had fallen under siege. Marianne Michel took care of the littlest ones, with the help of the "big girls" of twelve. Louise Michel's school made solidarity a matter of practice rather than theory.

But the first requirement was to feed all these children, and during the siege, this meant constant struggle. The mayor of Montmartre, Clemenceau, could at first make sure that they had milk, vegetables, horsemeat and often even sweets.¹² Later, though, in the dead of winter, they were reduced to weekly rations of eight pounds of bread per fifty children and

some vermicelli, lard and other oddments with which to eke out meagre horsemeat stews.¹³ Many children died of cold and hunger during that winter of siege but, thanks to Clemenceau, the children in Louise's asylum remained relatively privileged.

The mayor of Montmartre and Louise Michel had more in common than this impulse for charity and mutual assistance. Clemenceau had sent a directive to all the schools in his arrondissement which separated church from state and in effect created secular schools: the children were free to attend catechism, but the teachers were no longer obliged to take them to it. Louise, who welcomed this measure enthusiastically, was the only one in all Montmartre to obey it.¹⁴ One must add, however, that during her frequent absences from the school Marianne and Malvina Poulain would promptly restore the traditional religious practices.

Louise had become furiously anticlerical. She sent the paper *La Marseillaise* a letter denouncing religious workhouses "which starve the families" and religious schools, which were open only to the children of the bourgeoisie. She could provide, she claimed, "a list of unhappy children whose parents have given up the fight to win admittance for them to the nuns' asylums or schools." The nuns rejected the children of the people? "So much the better. It is time these daughters of Torquemada* disappear." For everything in France was in flux, and charity would be replaced with fraternity. "Fraternity will mean democratic schools for all children and work for every family."¹⁵

The misery of this cruel winter placed more demands on Louise's charity than she could possibly meet. One day, Georges Clemenceau saw a certain man hunched over a bowl of soup at her place and murmured discreetly, "Do you realize that this man is a known thief?" "Well," she replied, "he's still hungry."¹⁶

This was entirely characteristic of her. Mme Paul Meurice once noticed that Louise had nothing more on her bed than a thin horse-blanket. She told Victor Hugo about it, who sent Louise some money with which to purchase a warmer cover, but Louise instead spent the money on someone else. Hugo offered to replace the money, on condition that she this time spend it on herself. "Then keep your money, because I won't keep the

* Tomas de Torquemada (1410 - 98) was the Spanish inquisitor-general
— transl. note

promise.”¹⁷ Respectable people were of the opinion that she “wasted” money. “But I hear the cries from below,” she explained to Hugo, in terms worthy of the master himself.

She found rooms and mattresses for people who had been bombed out of their homes. But how was she to feed them? Some women volunteered to work on the ambulances. But how could she find work for the rest? Couldn’t Hugo publish in *Le Rappel* an appeal “for help from the members of the former Committee of Moralization Through Work,” an appeal to “those devoted women, that they might help us find work”?

For the most part, though, she thought the women lacked as much common sense as the men did courage. She ridiculed their simperings: “Oh! You’re so tall! I have such confidence in you!”

The war surrounded them: from Saint-Denis you could hear the cannon booming. Louise kept one ear cocked, for she had promised to join a certain old woman at the La Chapelle depot should anything happen. Enjolras sent her “dear Master” this probably quite accurate self-judgment: “It’s not heroism, I assure you. I just love danger! Perhaps that’s the savage in me.”¹⁸

Whatever Louise might write to Hugo (in a very feminine effort to boost her own stock at the expense of the others), women did play a solid part in the defence of Paris. The good bourgeois ladies formed an Aid Society for the Victims of War, under the direction of Mme Jules Simon. Louise herself paid them tribute: “The members of the National Defence did very little defending, but their wives were heroic.”¹⁹ Other women signed on as ambulance nurses, as canteen workers, and tried generally to alleviate first scarcity and then outright famine. Nathalie Lemel and her food co-operative *La Marmite* managed to feed hundreds of starving Parisians.²⁰ Louise personally asked her friend Benoit Malon, who worked in the town hall of the eighteenth arrondissement, to slip a particular bakery worker a bit of beef or horsemeat, “for his chest is so weak.”²¹

To feed the hungry, clothe the freezing, care for the wounded, is all part of the great tradition of charity, and traditionally a role assumed by women. From here on, however, Louise Michel chose a second path as well. Charity was a necessary and immediate palliative, but no more than that, and it needed to be surpassed and then filed away in history’s archives. Louise now whole-heartedly joined the Parisian

masses in their choice of the historical path of revolt and social justice.

Blanquists, Internationalists and other "anonymous enthusiasts"²² led the formation of a Central Committee of the Republican Federation of the National Guard, and of a Committee of the Twenty Arrondissements, which represented the district-level committees. Louise Michel belonged to both the women's and the men's Vigilance Committees of the eighteenth arrondissement. The former, with such stalwarts as Mme Poirier, Béatrix Excoffon and old Mme Blin, was responsible for distributing work, channelling assistance, visiting the poor and the sick, and providing home-care for them. But the committee also had its political side, though Mme Poirier, who leaves us this information, concealed it from the Council of War.²³

The men's Vigilance Committee was primarily political and revolutionary. "Those who joined it were absolutely devoted to the Revolution." Woman though she was, this was where Louise felt truly at home. Moreover, "they didn't define your duty according to your sex. That stupid question was finally done with... I have never seen such true, clear, good minds at work. It was an amazing group: sound people, every one of them, not a weakling among them."²⁴

And here, among these "distinguished" individuals, Louise finally found her Saint-Just, her kindred soul, her pure and fierce alter-ego, the man she had so long awaited, the one whose face she had conjured up during the darkness of Empire, the one who had murmured to her:

Ecoute, l'heure sonne, viens...

This man, this Saint-Just reborn, was the Blanquist Théophile Ferré. She had first met him in the Montmartre cemetery during the days of Empire, at a memorial service for Murger (tombs and cemeteries played a prominent role in the life of Louise Michel).²⁵ Ferré was born in Paris on May 6, 1846, and was thus much younger than Louise, who was born in 1830, though she always gave her birthdate as 1836. Despite her singular lack of coquetry, Louise seemed to feel a need to drop her age closer to that of the young men who were her comrades, rather than let herself be known for a woman in her forties — which, at the time, was considered quite old. This feminine deception of hers looks to me like yet another indication of her love for Ferré.

Théophile Ferré, a modest accountant by occupation, was anything but modest in his revolutionary passion and boldness. In 1868, for example, he closed a commemorative speech at the tomb of Baudin (who had died on the barricades in 1851) with the provocative words: "Long live the Republic, the Convention in the Tuileries and Reason in Notre-Dame."* He had already been convicted four times for political offences. He was one of the Blanquist defendants at the trial held in Blois (July-August 1870) and was acquitted for lack of proof, but then expelled from the High Court for creating a disturbance.²⁶ In short, he was just the revolutionary hero for Louise. She was already friendly with his sister Marie, a time-honoured way to approach the brother.²⁷

Handsome? No, certainly not. He was very short, as we are told both by Clère (who despised the Communards) and by Vuillaume (who was himself a Communard). He had a black beard which "overran" his face (since 1848, the beard had been a sign of republican sympathies), a hooked nose, very black eyes (as far as Clère was concerned, all this black of beard and eye suggested a corresponding blackness of soul), but "very gentle eyes, which gleamed behind his pince-nez with unusual intensity" (adds Vuillaume). Clère took pains to describe Ferré's grating voice: when he spoke, "he balanced on the tips of his toes" (a habit with many short men) and "crowed like a shrill and angry rooster."²⁸ Unkind, perhaps, but apparently true. Ferré himself, in a short note written at the age of sixteen, stressed all his failings: his shortness, his long nose (which later earned him the nicknames of Fée Carabosse,** Maréchal Nez***) and the rest. He added: "My thoughts are unusual for young men of my age. I want to appear serious and austere, and that simply doesn't go with my comic appearance. Courage, my poor friend..."²⁹

But his physical appearance doesn't matter. What does matter is what Louise saw in him, and that was, the perfect revolutionary. She adored him and, though she never comments

* triply provocative, since it called for: first, the Republic, though Napoleon III ruled at the time; second, for the (National) Convention, i.e. the government of the French Revolution, to reign in the royal palace of the Tuileries; and third, for Reason, not God, to reign in the cathedral of Notre Dame

** the traditional hag-like, wicked fairy of children's stories

*** lit. "Marshal Nose," a pun on Maréchal Ney, the famous French Marshal

— *transl. notes*

on this, she was widely assumed to be his mistress. During the Commune, apparently, there were portraits of Louise Michel on sale, with the caption, "Ferré's mistress." This is without any doubt untrue. This great passion by a plain spinster in her forties for a boy of twenty-five could only have been platonic. There is nothing on Ferré's side, in any event, to suggest that he loved "the great *citoyenne* as a woman; the letters he sent her could have been written to any comrade in the struggle.

The Vigilance Committee of the eighteenth arrondissement offered Louise a passionate climate to match her own temperament, love mixed with revolution: "We felt free, able to look back without unduly imitating '93* and forward without fear of the unknown." She spent every free moment at 41 de la Chaussée Clignancourt, the Committee's meeting-place. During that hard siege winter, they'd share one herring between them³⁰ and more frequently warm themselves "with the heat of ideas" than with wood or coal. Sometimes, to honour a guest, they would stoke the fireplace with a sacrificial chair or dictionary. Committee members usually arrived about five or six in the afternoon, to review that day's events and plan the next. Then, at eight o'clock, each member would leave for his own club. Ferré chaired the club which met in Salle Petot and Louise, the one which met at the Justice de Paix. These clubs were also known as Clubs of the Revolution, Grandes Carrières district, a turn of phrase which reminded the bourgeoisie unpleasantly of '93. Under the Government of National Defence, however, chairing a club brought the lively possibility of a prison cell rather than honour to the individual involved.

Louise kept a little pistol in her desk, which she'd flourish whenever the "respectable" National Guards, armed with rifles, turned up to disturb their meetings.³¹ The people of Montmartre, mind you, returned the compliment by dropping into the "bourgeois" clubs, to spread their own brand of propaganda.

Louise not only endorsed such strong methods, she practised them herself. There weren't enough ambulances in Montmartre. Louise, with a young girl from the Society for Elementary Education in tow, decided to provide another one. No money? Not to worry, that could be arranged... And so the two women set out, flaunting their politics with their broad red

* i.e. 1793, the Revolutionary Paris Commune — *transl. note*

sashes, to beg money from the churches. They chose a particularly vicious-looking member of the National Guard to accompany them, who rapped his gun on the church flagstones, just to get everyone's attention. He succeeded. The priests and the faithful, "pale with terror," promptly gave their widow's mite. The two women next went door-to-door, first visiting the financiers ("Jewish and Christian both") and then the "solid citizens" in general. The farcical aspect of this little adventure in terrorism didn't escape Louise, who displayed, then as always, her love for pranks. The expedition provoked gales of laughter down at the Montmartre town hall, though of course the delegates would have been most censorious had it been a failure.³²

Paris, still besieged, suffered a terrible double blow when it learned on the same day of the capitulation of the French army at Metz (October 27) and the failure of the attempted sortie from Le Bourget. The Vigilance Committees organized a demonstration for the following day, October 31, in the square in front of City Hall. This time, they didn't cry, "Long live the Revolution!" as they had on September 4,* but rather, "Long live the Commune!" Despite the demonstrator's hesitancy and differences of opinion, the government promised to hold municipal elections and even promised not to seek to manipulate them. (The latter promise, naturally enough, was not kept.) October 31, like every other day when Louise played an active role in something, inspired her to a poem:

*Le trente et un octobre sonne.
Doublez vos gardes, Messieurs,
La vile multitude tonne,
Fermez vos portes aux vengeurs...*

*Vainqueurs, apportez vos trophées,
Trochu, ses mystérieux plans,
Favre, ses discours larmoyants,
Bazaine, sa vaillante épée.*³³

Louise escaped arrest that time but soon after (December 1, 1870) spent two days in jail for her part in a women's demonstration which, in fact, she had neither organized nor even encouraged. Louise, you see, didn't believe in staging limited demonstrations. When *she* rose up, "it [would] be with

* date of the proclamation of the Third Republic, and formation of the provisional Government of National Defence — *transl. note*

the people, in arms." By now she was acquiring the reputation of being a ringleader. Ferré, Avronsart and Christ, in the name of the clubs, came to seek her release. (It must have pleased her that Ferré came to liberate her, just as, in her fairy tales in the Vroncourt days, the prince always came to free the prisoner.) Mme Paul Meurice, representing the Women's Society for the Victims of War, also interceded on her behalf, as did Victor Hugo, but by then she was already out of jail.³⁴

Even though she spent more time with the men's Vigilance Committee than with the women's, Louise did address an appeal to the Montmartre *citoyennes*. It concerned organizing women into groups which could then be responsible for specific activities (much more administrative in nature than political). Starting with their own daily concerns was certainly an excellent way to groom women for political action. "When the homeland is in danger, one must sound the alarm wherever necessary, unmask cowardice wherever it might hide. Keep watch." Why were there so many drunken National Guards? Why couldn't the sick gain admittance to hospital? "Are there not some who linger unnecessarily, and so deprive the poor of hospital beds?" It was up to the women to keep an eye on such things. "Here, in Paris, we breathe the air of death. There is treachery afoot. Should Trochu follow Bazaine,* the people must be roused. Keep watch!"³⁵

She told Victor Hugo that she would shout aloud in public meetings: "If cowards betray the government, we'll summon our own resources and make our own desperate sortie from Paris. If enough of us take part, we'll route the enemy like a flock of sheep. If we are only a few, then we shall die, but others will follow our example and in death we shall light the lamps of liberty." She assured Hugo once again of her unbounded admiration: "As others fail, you appear all the greater."³⁶

Her rage at these defeats, this encircling treason, found outlet in furious verse as well: *Les Vengeurs*. She attacked the "rabble" who slept, ate, drank as if nothing were happening, but she had complete confidence in the people (whom she distinguished from the rabble), the "terrible and great" revolutionary people.

* i.e. betray the people: General Louis-Jules Trochu was both head of the Government of National Defence and military governor of Paris; Marshal François-Achille Bazaine was the marshal who had surrendered at Metz on October 27, 1870. See also transl. note p. 148 — *transl. note*

*Nous n'avons plus ni fils ni pères.
 Haine, amour ont fui nos coeurs,
 Devant nous, trêve à vos prières,
 Nous sommes les sombres vengeurs.
 Nous viendrons par les vastes plaines
 Où l'herbe est verte sur les morts,
 Par Strasbourg, par Metz, par les forts
 Par l'Alsace et par la Lorraine...*

Make way for the people:

Place! Voici quatre-vingt treize...

and we shall "strike down both traitors and kings." Let them curse our memory in years to come:

*Aujourd'hui, chaque matin stoïque
 Tient le feu purificateur...*

*Pour la tombe ou pour la victoire
 Arborant ton rouge drapeau*

O République pour ta gloire

Nous saurions rire sur l'échafaud...³⁷

In these verses, for which she was later condemned, Louise merely reflected the fury of the revolutionary people of Paris.

On January 7, 1871, the delegates of the Twenty Arrondissements, Ferré, Vaillant and Vallès, placarded the walls of Paris with a document now known as the Red Poster: "Has the government which, on September 4, assumed responsibility for national defence, fulfilled its mission? No." There were, in Paris, 500,000 fighters surrounded by only 200,000 Prussians. Yet, the republican government refused to arm the people, the republican government left the Bonapartists alone and jailed the republicans. The republican government had failed to govern, plan or fight. This regime, should it continue, could lead only to surrender. Would the people of Paris, the people of '89,* await that surrender in "passive despair"? In the name of all Paris, the delegates of the Twenty Arrondissements demanded arms for the people, free rations and an all-out attack. "Make way for the people! Make way for the Commune!"

Trochu replied that he would never surrender, and immediately prepared a sortie against the enemy. This sortie was later summarized as follows by historian Maxime du Camp, the most hostile of all commentators on the Commune: "They

* i.e. 1789, the French Revolution — *transl. note*

hoped to turn these National Guards into pacifists by throwing them head-long into dreadful peril.”³⁸ It was the absurd, the bloody Buzenval sortie of January 19. The few National Guard who survived it (and 4,070 officers and soldiers didn’t), however, understood perfectly well that this ill-prepared, ill-led adventure had had no other purpose than to show the Parisians the impossibility of any further resistance. Vinoy replaced Trochu as military governor of Paris, while General Clément Thomas called on the National Guard, not to fight the Prussians, but rather “to rise up in full force and crush the rebels.”

Furious, swindled, decimated, betrayed, the National Guards and the clubs decided on January 21 to hold a demonstration the following day in front of City Hall. That night, a group of armed men forced the release of Flourens and some other revolutionaries from Mazas prison.

The crowd was there, come January 22, at City Hall. Louise Michel, André Léo, the women of the Montmartre Vigilance Committee, worthy Mme Poirier, old Mme Blin, flaxen-haired Béatrix Excoffon — they were all there. Louise wore the uniform of the National Guard and carried her pistol. The crowd cried: “No surrender! War to the end! Long live the Commune!”

They could see Trochu’s Breton mobile guards massed at the windows of City Hall. They sent in delegates but Chaudey, assistant deputy mayor for Paris, and a Proudhonist, refused to let them pass. A moment later, a spray of bullets hit the square. “The shot sounded like hail in a summer storm.” The Bretons were using live ammunition. Some of the National Guards who fired back carefully aimed at the walls. “Not me,” said Louise Michel.

That was the first time she had ever heard the whine of bullets, and she responded to it with a sort of joyous rage: “The first time you take up arms in defence of your cause, you enter into the struggle so completely that you yourself become a sort of projectile.” Even so, her judgment remained calm. The people of Paris were being confronted by their own brothers, their erring brothers forced to defend an alien cause. “I couldn’t take my eyes off those pale, savage faces at the windows. They fired on us without emotion, like machines, just as they might fire at a pack of wolves [always wolves...]. And I thought: you’ll join us one day, you brigands, for you can’t be bought.

And we need people who refuse to sell themselves. My old grandfather's stories flooded into my mind, stories of the days when heroes battled heroes remorselessly, when the peasants of Charette, of Cathelineau, of La Rochejaquelein battled the armies of the Republic."*³⁹

Bretons, for Louise, were surrounded by their own special halo. They were the link back through history to Vercingetorix and his Gauls; they were hard and loyal men who, somehow, had to be reached through their religious faith and their legends, for once they understood the glory of the Revolution, they would become its most unwavering supporters.

The hail of bullets continued. Men died, a woman crumpled at Louise's side. "Yes, you're the ones, you Armorican** savages, blond-haired savages, you're responsible for all this. But at least you are fanatics, and not mercenaries. [Louise, a fanatic herself, thought fanaticism a virtue.] You kill us because you think you should, but one day you'll join us and fight for Liberty. You'll bring to that fight the same fierce conviction you display right now and together we shall mount the assault on the old world."*⁴⁰

Oh, I love Louise in her prophet's role. But we must leave these poetic heights for the ground-level reality of daily life and political turmoil.

That same evening, Jules Ferry*** gave his version of the day's events. As in every war-time communiqué, the other side attacked first: "They attacked us with bombs and explosives. Aggression..." etc. A good pretext, anyway, for imposing law and order on those *enragés* who had survived the Buzenval slaughter. The clubs were banned, seventeen papers suppressed, the "ringleaders" arrested. Flourens, who had just escaped thanks to the assault on the Mazas jail, was once again sentenced to death (this time in absentia), as were Blanqui and Pyat.

On January 29, Paris learned that an armistice had been concluded with the Prussians: Paris was to be disarmed, the army in Paris (with the exception of one division) was to surrender, the forts to be occupied by the Prussians, and a war

* i.e. peasants who sided with these Royalist leaders against the First Republic

** Armorica is a section of Brittany

*** then a member of the Government of National Defence; later a prime minister of France — *transl. notes*

indemnity of two hundred million francs paid within two weeks. By making peace with the Prussians (men of order and discipline), the government would finally be free to deal with the people of Paris.

Elections for a National Assembly were called for February 8, and the results set up another *chambre introuvable*.^{*} The rural areas, the peasantry, elected the most conservative aristocrats possible, the notaries most devoted to the status-quo, the greasiest of petty squires. And, at their head, M. Adolphe Thiers, who was Daumier's^{**} chosen perfect image of the bourgeoisie. The Paris deputies, on the other hand, represented every political tendency imaginable, but only six of them favoured peace at any price.

The preliminaries to this peace agreement were signed on February 26: France was to pay Germany five billion francs, give up Alsace (minus Belfort) and one-third of Lorraine, and — the ultimate dishonour, in Parisian eyes — allow the German army to march into the city.

The Prussians would be denied one thing at least, if Parisians had their way: the cannons, the cannons that had been purchased by public subscription. On the 26th, therefore, the people of Paris went to the fashionable districts and dragged the cannons away to the heights of land in their own working-class districts of Chaumont, Belleville and Montmartre. Just let anyone try to seize them! On March 1, the Prussians finally marched through the pointedly empty streets and quit the city again the following day. A brief stay.

The National Assembly, which had installed itself in Versailles (such a reassuring city^{***}), could now forget about the Prussians and concentrate on the Parisians. What did the daily lot of the Parisian people matter to the large landowners and rural industrialists? Who cared about the death-toll from the siege, or the condition of the survivors? The Assembly immediately began to develop its policies on clear class lines. The commercial bills still outstanding of businesses which had gone into bankruptcy between August 13 and November 13 were now declared payable on demand, although there was no more

^{*} i.e. the "Unfindable Chamber" — a phrase coined by Louis XVIII in gratified amazement when the elections of 1815 somehow managed to turn up a pro-Royalist majority for the Chamber of Deputies

^{**} French painter, sculptor and political caricaturist

^{***} for its royalist connotations and its conservative nature — *transl. notes*

commerce in the city and no way to pay; the daily wage of the National Guards (1 franc 50), which helped keep both them and their families alive, was cancelled, although there was no other work to be had. And then, on March 8, the government tried to disarm Paris, to remove the cannons. The stage was now set for a confrontation between the bourgeois republic and the people.

V - LONG LIVE THE COMMUNE

M. Thiers was quite convinced that with the constabulary, the police, 15,000 troops and General Vinoy, the people of Paris could easily be brought to heel. But first, he would have to prepare the fevered public mood for the inevitable submission. On March 17, therefore, he issued the following proclamation: "For some time now, ill-intentioned men have used the pretext of resisting the Prussians, who are no longer before our walls [he stressed], to justify their control over a part of the city..." A secret committee, he went on, was claiming sole authority over one section of the National Guard and thus flouting the authority of General d'Aurelles de Paladine, "a man most worthy to be your leader." (But Parisians had had enough of these worthy generals who had nonetheless lost the war.) "These men tack up posters claiming they defended you from the Prussians who, in fact, did nothing more than appear before your walls [Thiers did belabour the point], levelling the guns which, had they opened fire, would have meant your own destruction, homes, children and all." Obviously, the government could already have retaken the public-subscription cannons, jailed the criminals, etc., but it wished to allow time for "misguided men to dissociate themselves from those who have misguided them." And so, the government called on "all good Parisians" to help them retake the guns and restore order. And finally, a threat: "Having received this notice, you will now approve our recourse to force." Louise shrugged: "M. Thiers' proclamation meant about as much to us as one from

King Dagobert* would have done.”¹

General d'Aurelles de Paladine had roughly the same impact when he in turn called on “good” National Guards to defend their city, their homes, their families and their possessions. The cannons were to be retaken that same night, March 17. The operation was as ill-prepared as the war itself had been — they forgot to bring the horses needed to drag away the guns — and it was entrusted to soldiers who were sick and tired of defeats and the officers who caused them.

From its side of the lines, the Central Committee of the Twenty Arrondissements kept watch, the Vigilance Committees kept watch. Louise Michel had come to La Butte-Montmartre bearing a message and so she did her surveillance from the post of the Sixty-first Battalion at 6 Rue des Rosiers. A shot was fired, its source unknown, which wounded National Guardsman Turpin, who was on sentry-duty. Louise and a canteen worker gave him first aid while waiting for Clemenceau, who was not only mayor of Montmartre but a physician as well.

And then Louise, rifle under her coat, rushed down from the Butte to sound the alarm, crying, “Treason!” At the Vigilance Committee of the eighteenth arrondissement, Ferré, old Moreau and Avronsart were already forming up a column. Louise was at fever pitch, joyously anticipating the coming battle: “The warning bell sounded at dawn and we charged the slope, knowing that an army in full battle formation was waiting for us on top. We thought we were going to die for liberty. We were transported...” And then, with her usual poetic sensitivity to the colours and textures of the moment: “The Butte was enveloped in a white glow, a splendid dawn of deliverance.”²

The women of Montmartre made the climb with their men — including old Marianne who, worried, had come looking for her impossible daughter. “It gave me great anguish,” said Louise, when she suddenly found her mother at her side.³

But there was no battle after all on the heights of Montmartre. The women threw themselves on the cannons and the soldiers, taken by surprise, made no move. General Lecomte gave the order to fire on the crowd but a junior officer countered it, and the troops reversed their arms.⁴ Throughout Paris, that strange scene of fraternization was repeated as

* King of the Franks — *transl. note*

women, National Guards and disconcerted soldiers mingled peacefully.

That evening on Rue des Rosiers, General Lecomte (who had given the order to fire) and General Clément Thomas (remembered for his role in the massacres of June 1848), both of whom had been taken prisoner in the course of the day, were killed. The Montmartre revolutionaries could perhaps have saved their lives, says Louise, but "tempers flared, there was a scuffle, and guns went off."⁵ With a courtesy rare in any war and rarest of all in civil war, she then saluted the courage of Clément Thomas: "He died well."⁶ Ferré and Jaclard ordered the release of the other officers who had been captured that day: "We wished to avoid both cowardice and pointless cruelty."⁷

Turpin, the wounded sentry, died several days later. On the day of his funeral Ferré cried, "To Versailles!" and the crowd shouted back, "To Versailles!"⁸ The Montmartre revolutionaries wanted to march immediately on the city where the government had taken refuge. Louise Michel agreed entirely: "Victory was ours. It could have been made permanent had we set out the next day, en masse, for Versailles... Many would have died along the way, but our victory would have been irreversible." Later, looking back on the events of March 18 (her analysis at the time was undoubtedly not this clear), she said, "Legality, universal suffrage...as usual these kinds of scruples arose, and they are fatal to any Revolution."⁹

For the Central Committee did not agree with the proposed march on Versailles. It was suddenly master of Paris and felt the burden of its responsibility for human lives. It therefore rejected armed confrontation and opted for legality. It used wall-posters to explain to Parisians the nature of the Committee and its goals. First, it thanked the army for its reluctance to "raise its hand against the sacred ark of our liberties" and called on Paris and France "whatever the consequences, to start building the republic together, for it is the only form of government capable of putting an end once and for all to foreign invasions and civil war." The Central Committee therefore called the people of Paris to new elections. Meanwhile, it lifted martial law, re-established freedom of the press, abolished councils of war, granted amnesty to political prisoners and sent its own representatives to run the various

ministries whose responsible officials had deserted them.

With perfect legality, the Central Committee borrowed money from M. de Rothschild and from the Bank of France, in order to meet its expenses. Meanwhile, in Versailles, the Assembly flatly condemned the rebel government. No reconciliation was possible.

On March 25, the Central Committee issued yet another poster, this time concerning the elections set for the following day: "The men who still serve you best are those whom you choose from among your own ranks, who live your life and suffer the same hardships." It declared it would hand over control to the new representatives. Versailles' answer was to call on the people of Paris to stand firm with its National Assembly in its opposition to these "criminals," these "madmen," who so dishonoured their city. Despite the appeal, 229,000 Parisians* — predominantly from the working-class districts — turned out to vote.

On March 29, in front of City Hall, the Central Committee solemnly handed over its powers to the new Paris Commune.

Obviously, being a woman, Louise Michel had played no part in the elections. The role of women during the Commune was important but still marginal, and well removed from political decision-making. Louise exulted anyway: this time, the Revolution had triumphed and moreover, Ferré was one of those elected from the eighteenth arrondissement. His triumph was some compensation at least. Even better, it was the triumph of the people of Paris as a whole. Louise was dazzled by the ceremony and described it with her customary lyricism:

"A human sea, all bearing arms, their bayonets pressed as tightly together as flowers in a field, with the sound of the brass splitting the air and the heavy beat of the drums and, dominating it all, the unmistakable roll of the two great drums of Montmartre, the drums that woke all Paris the night the Prussians marched in and again on the morning of March 18. All that indescribable sound, produced by a pair of sinewy wrists clutching a pair of fragile sticks..." This was the great orchestra of brass and drums that she had dreamed of the day she composed *Un Rêve des sabbats*. "The heavy voice of the cannons boomed a measured salute to the Revolution." The bayonets dipped before the red flags that surrounded the bust

* men only, of course — *transl. note*

of the Republic. The battalions of Montmartre, Belleville and La Chapelle had topped each of their flags with the "red flag of liberty," the Phrygian cap made famous during the French Revolution. They looked like the platoons of '93 all over again.

The members of the Central Committee were grouped on a platform, with the members of the new Commune before them. "Every one with his red sash. A few speeches, punctuated by the cannon salutes." The Central Committee declared its mandate at an end and handed over its powers to the Commune. The names of the new delegates were read to the crowd. A great cry went up, "Long live the Commune!" The drums rolled, cannons roared. "In the name of the people, the Commune is proclaimed!" As Louise put it later, "A spectacular opening for the Commune, whose grand finale was to be death."¹⁰

Louise followed enthusiastically the measures voted by the Commune, the achievements which have given it historical stature. Limited social measures though they were, they did seek to ease the daily life of the people: an embargo on the sale of pawned articles with a value of 25 francs or less (during the siege, people with nothing more than a mattress or stove to their names made constant use of the "pauper's bank"); confiscation of property in mortmain*; food rations for injured Guardsmen; pension rights extended to common-law wives and natural children (a measure that simply recognized a fact of proletarian life and its disregard for civil and religious law); abolition of grants to religious organizations; election of magistrates by the citizens; abolition of fines and penalties in the workshops; abolition of night-work in bakeries. However, and this is indicative of the "idealistic" side of Louise's nature, she seems not to have grasped the importance of the directives concerning the organization of labour which were issued by Frankel and Elizabeth Dmitrieff. These two, who were friends of Marx, understood much better than the other Communards the importance of economic transformation. Louise was an idealist and a mystic; her Revolution was an emotional affair of charity and political opposition to Versailles.

She was also keenly interested in the intellectual development of the Commune. Courbet dreamed of a Paris "in

* Mortmain (lit. "dead hand"): property held in mortmain was property held by ecclesiastical or other corporations deemed to be eternal and thus, was property held in perpetuity — *transl. note*

which each person could freely follow his own genius, "a Paris more beautiful than any other city in Europe, since its own citizens would be responsible for its organization. The city's artists — including Corot, Courbet, Daumier, Manet — came together and formed a Federation of Paris Artists. The museums stayed open. The scholars at the Academy of Sciences continued their work. "We wanted it all and we wanted it right away — art, science, literature, discoveries. Our lives flamed with enthusiasm. We were so eager to leave the old world behind."¹¹

Being a teacher herself, Louise was naturally obsessed with the need for reform in education. Groups like New Education, and the Society of Friends of Instruction thought the time had come to reorganize education and start training children to be responsible citizens. Louise sent the Commune a suggested methodology, which was based on her own long professional experience. It consisted of teaching children their basics with as few words as possible, those few words being carefully selected to match the students' level of comprehension. There was to be greatly increased attention to the visual arts: she suggested, for example, giant tableaux representing the major events in world history and the five divisions of the world. (We know what importance visual aids have since been given in pedagogy.) Yet it wasn't enough to develop the children's intelligence. They must also be given a high and unwavering moral sense. "Their conscience must be so developed that the only possible reward or punishment would be the feeling of duty done, or of wrong behaviour." She was talking about a secular morality, of course, without reference to any religion whatsoever, though she did allow for religious choice by the parents.¹²

This was a major concession: Louise had become violently anticlerical and antireligious. In *La Patrie en danger*, she had already compared religious workshops to houses of prostitution, in that both were "places of corruption."¹³ Now she attacked again. In the name of the women's Vigilance Committee of the eighteenth arrondissement, she asked the members of the Commune "to establish vocational schools and secular orphanages immediately, to replace the schools and orphanages now run by the ignoramuses of both sexes." Never again, she declared, would "our sons be sent to the king's slaughterhouses and our daughters served up as food for the passions." That, unfortunately, is a fair representation of Louise Michel's style

and explains why it is difficult to take her seriously as a writer. She would follow a perfectly reasonable statement — “We wish all to receive a state education” — with a relapse into her preferred maudlin terminology: “May the fields no longer run with blood and the muddy streets no longer throng with prostitutes; may a free people forever proclaim their universal Republic.” Mme Poirier and the others unflinchingly signed their names to this purple prose — or else Louise, as she was later to claim, signed their names for them. If so, they were to pay a heavy price for this forgery.¹⁴

Meanwhile, Louise “kept watch,” pointed out the weak and the potentially traitorous: *Citoyenne* Renaud of 24 Rue Oudot, Montmartre, has informed me that the commander of the 142nd regularly visits Versailles.”¹⁵ Or: “Be on your guard against one of our friends, a man of book-learning but little common sense, who seems to be trying to avoid doing his tour of duty on the line. He is a good soldier, and we have need of him... I am speaking of citizen Potin.”¹⁶ This is another demonstration of Louise’s lack of realism. She just didn’t understand that it’s very dangerous business to press-gang reluctant men into the front ranks of the Revolution.

The, suddenly, Louise had a brainstorm: it was time to go to Versailles and assassinate M. Thiers. Tyrannicide was one of the more simplistic and exalting of the old revolutionary mythologies, and it appealed strongly to her. Her dream of assassinating Napoleon III had remained just that, a pipedream. This time, however, she confided her project to Ferré. Perhaps it was a bit of feminine coquetry as well, an urge to show her beloved just how devoted she was to their common cause. And too, she may have wanted to prove to Ferré, who (like most of the Communards) was anti-feminist, that women were also capable of great courage. “I thought that killing M. Thiers right in the Assembly would provoke such terror that the reaction against us would be stopped dead.”¹⁷ Ferré had much more political sense than Louise. He reminded her that the deaths of Generals Lecomte and Clément Thomas had needlessly shocked public opinion in both the provinces and Paris itself, and had been widely condemned. Assassinating Thiers would crush the revolution, not the reaction. “I didn’t agree and I didn’t think public disapproval mattered as long as the act itself was useful to the Revolution. But, it was just possible that he was right.” Rigault, the Commune’s delegate to the prefecture of police, agreed with

Ferré. The two men then added, "And anyway, you'd never make it to Versailles." 18

Louise accepted the challenge. Very well, she would give up her idea of assassinating Thiers, but she would prove to them that she could reach Versailles. A few days later, she set out on her rather childish escapade. These were still early days in revolutionary history, when the principals in the drama had the taste and the time for such pranks. Louise, so respectably dressed that her own shadow wouldn't have recognized her, peacefully made her way to Versailles, took a stroll around the park which was being used as an army camp and paused long enough to make a little propaganda for the revolution of March 18. Soldiers listened to this strange woman and, sure enough, the next day an officer changed sides. Louise sent him off to Paris with a letter of introduction: "Citizen L [illegible], I present to you citizen Jules Dupont, whom I met in Versailles. He would like to join General Eudes but, in the interim, puts himself entirely at your disposal for any task useful to the cause. Here, then, is citizen Jules Dupont, whom I recommend to you as a good citizen and our friend. Salutations and equality." 19

Louise went next to large Versailles bookstore. She made a very favourable impression on the clerk, bought some newspapers as proof of her successful trip and then, having amused herself by telling the poor clerk the most scandalous tales she could invent about "that woman" Louise Michel, set out on her return trip to Paris.

Amusing herself by blackening her reputation: she was to indulge in this sort of prank more than once. But, I think, it was more than a prank; I think it was an unconscious urge to play a role, to give herself an importance that, at the time, she really didn't have. For Louise often seemed to be "playing" her own life and she handled that role perfectly until the day she died — precisely because the person she chose to play corresponded so well to her real self.

Once back in Paris, Louise went immediately to tell her story to the Montmartre officials, who didn't even recognize her in her respectable middle-class disguise, and then went to tease Rigault and Ferré (especially Ferré...), whom she called a pair of "Girondists." *20

* allusion to the "moderate" republican party during the French Revolution and thus a suggestion that Rigault and Ferré, unlike herself, quailed at strong action — *transl. note*

There were soon to be much more serious matters to occupy her time, and she rose magnificently to the occasion. At the beginning of April, Versailles declared war on Paris. From then on, Louise never stopped. Ambulance nurse and soldier both, she was to be seen in Clamart, Issy, Neuilly — wherever there was danger, combat and wounded soldiers to be cared for. Moreover, she knew how to describe what she observed and felt. Whenever she is reporting events in which she had been personally involved, relating impressions directly received, her accounts are excellent.

She wore the uniform of the National Guard, and belonged to the Montmartre Sixty-first Battalion, under the command of Emile Eudes. (He was also the husband of her friend Victorine Louvet whom, on that long-ago vacation, she had taken to the sacred oak and made listen to her poem about human sacrifice among the Gauls. Victorine Louvet also turned out to be pretty handy with a gun.)

Early April: "Here we are on Champs-de-Mars, our weapons stacked in neat piles; it's a lovely night..." Louise finally had a "good weapon," a Remington carbine. She'd spun a network of reassuring white lies around her mother, with incredible attention to detail. There she sat expecting battle, with letters in her pocket ready to be posted to her mother that described her work with an ambulance and her intention to drop by for a visit.²¹ She'd taken care of everything at the school as well, having made over to her assistant Malvina Poulain an acknowledgement of a debt of 158 francs for honoraria.²² All her obligations, then, had been met, both to her mother and to the teacher who would try to carry on in her absence (with old Marianne's assistance). Now Louise was quite marvellously free to fight for liberty. "Now we fall silent, it's time for battle. There's a hillside before us, I charge toward it, crying 'To Versailles! To Versailles!' Razoua throws me his sabre, we clasp hands. Above us, a shower of projectiles; heaven itself is on fire..." They formed up their ranks for the expected skirmish. "You'd think we were old hands at this line of work."²³

Now they've reached Les Moulineaux. They camp at the Jesuit monastery. "The Montmartre people and myself, all of us who had expected to advance further than this, we cry with rage. But we're confident..." The Jesuits were all gone save one, an old man who said he wasn't afraid of the Commune. Louise thought the monastery cook looked a lot like Frère Jean des

Entommeures.* She cast her eye over the monastery's paintings and found them uniformly hideous.²⁴

Now they've reached the Clamart trenches. One night she stood watch accompanied by an old Pontifical Zouave who had gone over to the Commune. "Once, as we passed each other in the trenches, he looked at me and asked, 'What effect has this kind of life had on you?' I answered, 'Well, it has taught me that there is a river before us which must be crossed.' "²⁵

And another night, she stands guard in the Clamart cemetery. "I looked out over the tombs, abruptly flashing under an artillery flare and then lit by nothing more than the moon, but even so, gleaming like white phantoms, with the play of gunfire behind them all..."²⁶

Tombs, the moon, gunfire...here at last was a decor tailor-made for Louise Michel. Gun in hand, she was to throw herself into the tragedy, the great tragedy of the Revolution that offered her the role to which she had always felt herself called. Yet her sense of high drama didn't blind her to small details: climbing the rise to the Issy fort ("a spectral fort" that might have been drawn by Victor Hugo or Louise Michel herself), her eye picked out "the violets in the field, crushed under the dropping shells."²⁷

Then the Clamart station. Under furious bombardment by Versailles forces, one young man panicked and wanted to surrender. "Go ahead if you want to," said Louise. "But I'm staying here and if you try to surrender the station itself, I'll blow it up." And she sat down, candle in hand, next to their munitions dump. The young man fled in the morning and was never seen again.²⁸

Or another bombardment: here's Louise calmly drinking coffee and reading Baudelaire to a student who was trying to calculate where the shells would probably land.²⁹

Her contempt for danger, her disregard for even the most elementary precautions, sometimes annoyed her comrades. Called to the barricade on Rue Peironnet in Neuilly, she went off to play the organ in the deserted Protestant church. "I was having a wonderful time, when a captain and three or four furious Federals** suddenly burst in the door. 'So you're the one

* one of Rabelais' creations: a brawling, zestful monk for whom Gargantua had the abbey of Thélème constructed

** the *Fédérés*, i.e. the members of the 215 Paris battalions (out of a total of some 270) which supported the revolutionary cause and on March 3, 1871, formed the Republican Federation of the National Guard — *transl. notes*

drawing enemy fire on this barricade. I came to find whoever was responsible, and shoot him.' Thus ended my attempts to compose a few harmonies in imitation of the dancing bombs."³⁰

Her anecdotes are borne out by this item which appeared in the *Journal Officiel** of the Commune. "There is an energetic woman fighting in the ranks of the Sixty-first Battalion. She has killed several constables and police officers."³¹ Goullé offers further corroboration when he describes Louise at Clamart, a képi on her head, hobnailed boots on her feet, standing the midnight watch alone so that the men might rest. "She exercised a strange power over them..."³² George Clemenceau saw her in action at Issy: "In order not to be killed herself, she killed others... I have never seen her to be more calm. How she escaped being killed a hundred times over before my very eyes, I'll never know. And I only watched her for an hour..."³³ It was as if some kind of lucky charm were keeping her safe. *Le Cri du peuple* once announced that *citoyenne* Louise Michel, who had fought so valiantly at Les Moulineaux, had been wounded at the Issy fort. It was mistaken; she had suffered only a sprain.³⁴

Robust, tireless, *enragée*, whenever the Sixty-first Battalion took a few days rest, she promptly joined another company. And so she numbered among her companions in arms, "the gunners of Issy and Neuilly and the scouts of Montmartre."³⁵

She thought about her own behaviour and, I think, analyzed it accurately. "Was it sheer bravery that caused me to be so enchanted with the sight of the battered Issy fort gleaming faintly in the night, or with the sight of our lines on night manoeuvres, filing past the slopes of Clamart, or heading for Hautes-Bruyères, with the red teeth of the *mitrailleuse*** flashing on the horizon? It wasn't bravery; I just thought it a beautiful sight. My eyes and my heart responded, as did my ears to the sound of the cannon. Oh, I'm a savage all right, I love the smell of powder, grapeshot flying through the air, but above all, I'm devoted to the Revolution."³⁶ What she had loved of Catholicism, after all, had been the shadowy depths of

* the French Government's daily publication for official information and decrees which, after March 18, continued to appear but as an organ of the revolutionary government, through its articles were not normally official policy statements of that government or its bodies

** the ancestor of the machine-gun, a multiple-barrelled gun invented by the French and first unveiled in the Franco-Prussian War — *transl. notes*

the churches, the flickering candles, and the beauty of the ancient chants. She recalled her youth and reached the conclusions offered by her now-determinist philosophy: "It was inevitable: the wind blowing through the ruined chateau, the old people who raised me, the solitude and enormous liberty of my youth, the bits of scientific knowledge which I accumulated as best I might...these influences combined to make my ear receptive to all sorts of harmonies, my mind to all sorts of inspirations, my heart to both love and hatred. And it all came together in a single song, a single dream, a single love: the Revolution."³⁷

Louise might have added her irregular birth to this list of determining factors, for it set her forever on the margin of society and made her all the more sensitive to society's other injustices. Elizabeth Dmitrieff, another of the Commune heroines, had similar origins, being the daughter of a nurse and a former Hussar officer who never acknowledged her as anything more than his ward.

Had Louise been a man, she would very likely have been content to be a soldier, nothing more. But, being a woman, she lived this war on two planes. She fought and killed, but she also dragged the wounded to safety and nursed them, Versailles and Federal both. This may appear contradictory, but Louise throughout her life lived that contradiction: revolution and charity. It was her sense of charity, after all, which made her insist on the revolution.

So Louise was a soldier with the masculine side of her character and an ambulance nurse with the feminine; she set the tone for all the other ambulance nurses as well, they were both nurses and active combatants. These women, independent of both society and outside organization, gave their lives to the Revolution. "Their duty is to treat the wounded where they fall, to take up a gun where required. Their right, and they'll claim it, would be to set match to powder wherever reaction might triumph, for the Revolution must not be vanquished. Long live the Commune! Long live the Republic!" This document is very much in Louise Michel's style, but she had it co-signed by Mmes Fernandez, Gaullé, Poulain, Quartier and Dauguet.³⁸

The officials of the Commune, just like the army officers, very much distrusted these women who were out running around the battlefields instead of sticking to their kitchens. Misogyny, after all, is an ancient reflex, almost biological it

seems, and was quite apparent among the Communards as well as the Versailles reactionaries. The fine journalist André Léo* wrote about interviewing Louise Michel one day when she was cooling her heels with some comrades in Neuilly, waiting for someone to put them to work. "Oh," said Louise, "if only they'd let us care for the wounded. But if you knew the obstacles they put in our way, the backbiting, the hostility!"³⁹

Sometimes, they were even refused food rations. There was a most revealing exchange of correspondence on this subject between Louise and Varlin, who was responsible for supplies. Letters from this era are rare, and because these two are so pertinent, I quote them in full. Louise wrote, "Citizen Varlin, since the authority of your signature is being used to deny us rations, I think it my duty to inform you of the situation. I believe you would like your signature to be treated with respect. Would you kindly send me word on this matter. I am ordinarily to be found with the ambulance stationed at the Fourth Engineer Corps headquarters. Greetings and Equality. Louise Michel, volunteer ambulance nurse of the Commune."⁴⁰ Varlin replied, on May 3: "*Citoyenne* Louise Michel, ambulance nurse of the Commune, has the right to draw campaign rations. The administrative officers in the forts and battlegrounds where she serves are accordingly to supply her with food."⁴¹

Louise was better suited to a good Remington carbine than to logistical squabbles like this one, but sometimes they demanded her attention. She also directed the recruitment of women volunteers for the ambulances. Some prostitutes wished to sign on, but the squeamish gentlemen revolutionaries of the Commune had refused them this honour: "the wounded must be tended by pure hands." Louise had quite a different view of the matter. She insisted these women were not to blame for their lives: "Who has more right than these women, the most pitiful of the old order's victims, to give their lives for the new?"⁴² She had the women's Vigilance Committee of the eighteenth arrondissement take these prostitutes under their patronage.⁴³ Most of them were to die, and courageously, during the bloody week in May.

With all this to occupy her, Louise scarcely had time any

* ever since George Sand and Daniel Stern, a masculine first name had been considered *de rigueur* in the world of letters and indeed, Louise herself had signed her first poems either "Louis" or with the pseudonym "Enjolras" — *author's note*

more to chair the meetings of the revolutionary clubs. Nonetheless, she sent them motions⁴⁴ for their voted approval, to be presented by Mme Poirier or Béatrix Excoffon, depending on who was replacing her in the chair that particular day. One motion called for the elimination of the magistracy and its replacement by a commission of justice, the abolition of public worship, the confiscation of all ecclesiastical holdings and an exchange of Versailles prisoners for Blanqui. This last suggestion, however, was somehow transformed from "exchange of prisoners" to "execution of hostages."⁴⁵

And then, on May 21, while the Commune sat in its meeting and debated the subject of theatrical performances in the city, Versailles troops entered Paris. The battle was on. The old Jacobin Delescluze was now military commander (after Cluseret and Rossel), charged with the impossible task of defending the Commune. He called for revolutionary struggle, thus destroying the last vestiges of regular discipline still to be found in the Federal ranks. "An end to militarism, away with gold-swaggered army officers. Make way for the civilian combatant with his bare hands. It is time for revolutionary war..."

And so it began...desperate, frenzied, admirable battle; street by street, house by house, barricade by barricade; men, women, children, all of them soldiers of the Commune. The regular army, M. Thiers' honourable troops, had received orders to slaughter "in cold blood" all those who looked like *communeaux*.^{*} Dirty hands and ragged clothes were enough; should an unfortunate error be made, God would pick out his own.

Dombrowski had immediately sent Louise Michel, Mme Mariani and a few Federals to warn the Montmartre Vigilance Committee that the Versailles troops had entered Paris. "I don't know what time it was. The night was calm and beautiful. What did the time matter? What mattered now was that the revolution not be defeated, even in death." The Vigilance Committee then met at the Montmartre town hall, where Cecilia tried to organize the last resistance. Louise Michel and old Moreau went to examine the Butte, hoping to find some way to blow it up. The task was beyond the technology of the age, but Louise insisted on trying. At the town hall she found

^{*} partisans of the Commune are now regularly known as Communards, but terminology at the time itself was still variable — *transl. note*

all her old comrades of the Sixty-first Battalion, the ones with whom she had done most of her fighting, at Issy and Clamart. They said to her, "You were with us from the beginning, you must be with us to the end."

Louise first made Moreau promise that "the Butte will explode" and then set out with a detachment of the Sixty-first to keep guard in Montmartre cemetery. "Shells come over at regular intervals like the ticking of a clock, the clock of death. The clear night air is sweet with the perfume of the flowers, and the very tombstones seem alive." She came across the spot where a shell had fallen, glancing off a tree and sinking into the flowers below. She gathered those flowers, putting some on Murger's tombstone and the rest on that of old Mlle Poulin who had briefly helped her run her school on Rue Oudot.⁴⁶ Louise had always observed this old provincial ritual of laying flowers on graves, so here she was, in the midst of battle, carrying on like an old peasant woman on All Saints' Day...

And then she had what she forever after remembered as a transfiguring experience. She had just explored the whole cemetery to make sure every entrance was guarded — and for the sheer pleasure of walking those long pathways in moonlight. "It was the profound calm of death, which I have always loved so much." Then, pausing a moment before the tomb of Mlle Poulin: "I don't quite know what happened to me, but suddenly my life was one with all eternity and I knew, without any sense of surprise, that Mlle Poulin was very close to me. I remained in that state for quite a long while. It's impossible to convey to you [this strange tale was in a letter to Ferré] the curious experience I was undergoing." Louise knew they were defeated, yet she walked on, as if guided by her old friend. And, still in this altered state, she found two undefended gaps in the cemetery wall. "I shall never forget that night. There really is a life after death..."⁴⁷

It would have been useless for Louise to try to explain this unprecedented experience to her comrades, who had always been so exasperated by her lack of prudence — her Versailles promenade, for example, or the time in Clamart she read Beaude-laire while under fire, or the time in Neuilly when she played the organ near the barricade, or the time she ran out on the battlefield to save a cat. "This time," they would have said, "you'll stay put."

My feeling is that Louise "played" her life, in every sense of

the word "play"* and on every level.

The handful of defenders at the Montmartre cemetery were falling, one by one. Louise sped to the town hall, gathered up some fifty reinforcements whom she led back to the cemetery, some of them dying on the way. Upon her return, there were only fifteen Federals left: "Our ranks are thinner and thinner, but we can vouch for the barricades; they still hold."

From barricade to barricade, Louise picked her way to Chaussée-Clignancourt. There she was glimpsed by the seamstress Blanche Lefebvre, "who loved the revolution as a man loves a woman" and who died in the final battle at Place Blanche.⁴⁸

Soon after, Dombrowski came past on horseback. "We're lost," he said. "No!" replied Louise. They shook hands and, moments later, he was fatally wounded.

There had been seven on the barricades, now they were three: Louise, a Federal captain and a Breton (Brittany once again), "stocky, square-shouldered, with blond hair and blue eyes. That Breton wasn't Charette's man any longer. He embraced his new faith with the same passion he must have felt for the old, when he still believed in it." Louise also noted his "white, wolfish teeth." (the wolves again — like all poets, she constantly surrounded herself with her own chosen universe.) Suddenly, some more Federals appeared. "Over here!" cried Louise. "There are only three of us left!"

Then, as she wrote later, "I felt myself being grabbed, lifted and flung back into the trench, as if they were going to murder me..." For the soldiers were not Federals, but Versailles troops in false uniforms. When Louise, head spinning, managed to get to her feet again, her last two comrades had disappeared and the Versaillese were conducting a house-to-house search. She managed to evade them and ran off crying, "Set the fires! Fire, fire! There's only one barricade left!"⁴⁹

Sporadic fighting still continued. The women who hadn't died on the barricade at Place Blanche fought on in Place Pigalle. Les Batignolles and Montmartre were taken. "It was a massacre." The Tuileries, the Court of Accounts, the Legion of Honour, were all in flames. Old Delescluze, in top hat, frock coat and black trousers, was killed on top of the barricade, leaning on

* consider: to play; to gamble or speculate; to set in motion; to touch off; to operate; to stake, wager; to move a piece on a board; to trick or fool — *transl. note*

his cane. Versailles troops slaughtered as they came; massacre for massacre, the frantic mobs shouted for the blood of the Commune's hostages.* Federals battled on among the tombs of Père-Lachaise, with the last of them going down on May 27 at the "Wall of the Federals" on Rue du Repos. Ferré, Varlin and Jean-Baptiste Clément draped a final barricade in a red flag on Rue Fontaine-au-Roi, and managed to hold out until morning.

The forces of order had triumphed, but the massacre went on for good measure. Troops with flaming torches and dogs chased fleeing men right into the catacombs. "The dead were everywhere, and their stench hung over the dead city. Frightful swarms of flies attacked the bodies. Finally the victors, fearing an outbreak of plague, called a halt to the executions."⁵⁰

Nobody really knows how many victims there were. The official figure is 30, 000. The true figure is probably much higher.

From the first day of the Commune, Louise had not spent one night in her own home.⁵¹ At the height of the slaughter in Montmartre, she wanted to find her mother and "reassure her with every lie I can invent." Somebody gave her a grey skirt (her own was riddled with bullet holes, though her only injury was a scratch on her wrist) and a hooded cape, so that she might obey the conventional bourgeois decencies on her quest — only young girls and working-class women went out bareheaded.⁵² Slowly, painfully, she inched her way through the devastated streets. She found old Mme Blin, of the Vigilance Committee of the eighteenth arrondissement, who had no news of her mother but did report that the children were attending school as usual. The closer Louise came to her home, the more panic-stricken she felt: "What a sepulchre Montmartre was, in those lovely days of May!"

She found the schoolyard empty, the door shut. Her little dog Finette howled in the kitchen, accompanied only by a cat. Marianne was nowhere to be seen. The concierge told Louise, "Soldiers came here looking for you but since you weren't here, they took your mother to shoot in your place." Louise, horror-stricken, fled to the nearest army post: "Where is my mother?" An officer replied, "They're probably shooting her right now."

And so Louise ran on, this time surrounded by soldiers, to Bastion 43 (she later said Bastion 37, but she was mistaken).

* including the Archbishop of Paris, whom the Commune had vainly tried to exchange for Blanqui; Ferré would later be charged with the responsibility for these executions — *transl. note*

There, among the prisoners, was Marianne. Louise begged the commander to free her mother, since she herself had come to take her place. Marianne didn't want to go, but Louise won permission to escort her part-way home, in company with some soldiers who would then see the old woman safely to Rue Oudot. Louise did so and then, unescorted, came back to the Bastion, "as promised."⁵³

It all seems so casual to us today. We can hardly imagine a modern officer allowing such an important prisoner as Louise Michel to set off unescorted with her mother, trusting her to return as promised. Repression was still in its infancy in 1871; it has become much more sophisticated since then.

Louise knew many of the prisoners, friends from the Vigilance Committee, the clubs of the Revolution, the Sixty-first Battalion. A gallows had been set up on a little hillock. "A pall of smoke hung over Paris; the wind carried to us, like flights of black butterflies, scraps of burned paper."⁵⁴ A young man was brought in, whom the officials had mistaken for Mégy. The other prisoners pointed out the mistake, but he was summarily shot.⁵⁵

Then General de Galliffet and his entourage of general staff appeared on the scene. "Quite a large man, regular features, but his eyes absolutely danced with rage." Louise cast an admiring, experienced eye over his horse (they had kept horses at Vroncourt), as still and beautiful as a bronze statue.

"I am Galliffet!" announced the general. "People of Montmartre, you think me a cruel man. You're going to find out that I am much crueller than even you have imagined!" There was a general murmur among the prisoners at this statement, and suddenly Louise's voice cut through it, chanting "*C'est moi qui suis Lindor, berger de ce troupeau...*"* Galliffet, beside himself with rage, shouted, "Shoot that rabble!" but the soldiers, sickened by all the bloodshed, refused to obey. However, two Montmartre businessmen, hardly supporters of the Commune, were indeed shot by mistake in the confusion.⁵⁶

Next, the long march to Satory Plain. The prisoners were

* a patchwork quilt of puns and allusions: Galliffet announced himself in French, "*C'est moi qui suis Galliffet.*" This must have reminded Louise of the line from a La Fontaine fable, "*C'est moi qui suis Guillot, berger de ce troupeau.*" Why she substituted the name of Lindor — Almavira's disguise in Beaumarchais' *The Barber of Seville* and thus the stock figure of a lovesick Spanish serenador — for Guillot is not clear. In any event, the sheer insolence of any reply at all was enough to set off General Galliffet — *transl. note*

closely surrounded by cavalry. Louise once again took in the scene with her poet's eye. "We walked and walked, lulled by the rhythmic beat of the horses' hooves, through a night lit by irregular red flashes of light... We were marching into the unknown, it was a misty dream, yet every detail was clear." They filed down into the La Muette ravine. "This is where you'll die," they were told. "One of the guards asked me, 'What are you thinking about?' and I told him, 'I'm just looking...' "

That was always one of her most characteristic traits, to act and to observe at the same time, to play her part in the drama yet keep enough detachment to watch it as well.

After a long pause, they took up the march once again. They were led through Versailles itself, that sacred city of reaction, where well-bred youngsters crowded around them, "howling like a pack of wolves" (always wolves). Some even drew their pistols, but the cavalry pushed them back.

The prisoners marched on. A height of land, battlements on the wall: Satory. Their escorts jeered, mockingly invited them to "storm the wall, go ahead, just like your assault on the Butte..."

The last stretch was taken at the run, under the levelled *mitrailleuses*.⁵⁷

VI - LOUISE AND THEOPHILE

Louise was a prize catch. Her arrest papers show that the military knew her value, even if the wording ran a bit to fantasy: "Michel (Louise), *captain of the sharpshooters*, plus a sizable dossier. Escorted by captains d'Hauteville and Dubos, volunteers from the Seine. Paris, Bastion 43. May 24, 1871. The Assistant Provost Marshal of the First Army Corps of Versailles."¹ The Prefecture of Police, unaware of this latest development, issued to the chief of police for the Municipality of Paris an order for the arrest of the Michel girl, "rabble-rouser in the clubs and the streets," in case she had not yet been sought out.² No wonder that, when she arrived at Satory, they said, "It's not worth frisking that one. She'll be shot in the morning."

Louise was put in a small room, where she found Malvina Poulain, Béatrix Excoffon, Mme Mariani, an old nun who had given a sip of water to some dying Federal soldiers and a number of other women who didn't even know if they were prisoners of Versailles or of the Commune.³

From this garret, Louise could look down on prisoners crouched in the courtyard in the falling rain. Every now and then a man would rise as his name was called and then, followed by an execution squad, he'd shoulder the shovel or the pick with which he'd have to dig his own grave. Then there'd be a shot, and then silence. One morning, they called Louise, but it was for interrogation only, and she was transferred to the Chantiers prison, in Versailles itself.⁴

Two or three weeks later, the female prisoners were issued a pallet of straw (each pallet to sleep two women) and rations consisting of "siege bread" (bread filled out with straw and wood slivers) and a tin of preserves for every four women. Worst of all, however, were the lice: "Minute silver lines wound across the floor, eddying like currents between 'lakes' as large as anthills and filled with pearly swarms." These lice were huge, "with bristling backs, somewhat convex, something like a wild boar but the size of a small fly instead. There were so many of them, we could even hear them rustling as they moved."⁵

Louise was able to write immediately to Mme Jules Simon, whose husband was minister for Public Instruction, and ask her to tell her mother what was happening. Old Marianne then begged Mme Simon, "on my knees," to intercede on behalf of her daughter. Louise, however, had a different concept of honour. She wrote Mme Simon again, saying that she had devoted herself to the Revolution and she now accepted all the consequences of that free choice, be it exile or death. She didn't want anybody ever to be able to accuse her of "cowardly behaviour." (Louise never wavered on this point all her long life.) She therefore asked only one favour: that her mother be kept informed of her fate. "Do not let impulsive friends strip me of the one thing that cannot be taken from a prisoner."⁶

Louise amused herself by drawing caricatures on the walls of the people who came for a Sunday outing to the prison, just to get a close look at the dreaded *pétroleuses*. She also covered the walls with requests by the said *pétroleuses* that they be permitted to remain separate from the Versailles women who had been lodged in their cell "for the express purpose of sullyng the Commune." Next she threw a pitcher of coffee at the head of one of the guards: her mother had sent her that coffee and he wanted to confiscate it. Even in jail, Louise was still very much the "agitator."⁷

On June 15, the deputy public prosecutor to the Fourth Council of War had Louise transferred to the Versailles reformatory.⁸ There were advantages to the move: the reformatory offered washing facilities and clean linen.⁹ And there, she finally heard some news: Rossel, Rochefort and Ferré had all been arrested, Ferré in particularly dramatic circumstances. The soldiers had gone to his home but found nobody there except his mother and his sister Marie, who was suffering

from a very high fever at the time. They ordered Mme Ferré to tell them her son's whereabouts. She refused. "Then we shall take your daughter instead." The poor old woman, caught in such a cruel dilemma, collapsed in delirium. They were able to pick out the words "Rue Saint-Sauveur" among her ramblings, went there and seized Ferré. (His mother later died, completely mad, at Sainte-Anne.¹⁰) And so Ferré began his own drama, parallel to that of Louise.

On June 28, Captain Briot, deputy public prosecutor of the Fourth Council of War, had Louise brought from her prison cell at one in the afternoon and formally opened his interrogation. "You are accused of having taken part in the Parisian insurrection."

Louise replied very carefully. She went on at length about the school on Rue Oudot, taking pains to absolve her mother and Malvina Poulain of any irregular behaviour: "Whenever it was in their hands, the school was run on religious lines." She explained to him her own code of morality, guided solely by conscience. And what songs did she teach the children? "Le Chant du Travail," "La Marseillaise," "Le Vengeur" ...* What had she done during the Commune? Why, taken charge of a mobile ambulance. That accounted for her being seen in so many places, in Les Moulineaux, in Clamart, Montrouge, Neuilly... Then, when the Versaillese entered Paris, she had gone to Montmartre cemetery so as to continue aiding the wounded.

This truthful version of her interrogation (taken from police archives) is very different from the version Louise gives us in her book, *La Commune*, where she claims to have tackled the prosecutor head-on.¹¹ In fact, prudent Louise even denied having worn the Federal uniform: "I wore my red sash continuously from the 4th of September to the end." Once or twice during the siege, yes, she had attended a meeting in masculine attire.

She acknowledged belonging to the Labour Commission, the Aid Society for the Victims of War, the Society of Free-Thinkers, the Women's Rights group and the Garibaldi Legion.

And what about the public meetings? Well, she had chaired the meetings held by a group of women at the Justice

* given their revolutionary and republican nature, hardly songs that would win his approval — *transl. note*

de Paix on Grand-Rue de la Chapelle. It is known as a revolutionary club, but its only goal was "to edify the masses, raise their moral tone and accustom the able-bodied among them to the idea of living by their own labours." A most reassuring club. Then she stated her own beliefs, including the necessity for "the eradication of all religious cults, and their replacement by the strictest morality with conscience as its guide. That is the rule of conduct for one and all; for me, morality amounts to acting according to one's own convictions and treating oneself and others with justice. Politically, my goal is the universal Republic, which is to be achieved through the development of the highest facilities of each individual, the eradication of evil instincts through proper education, the profound comprehension of human dignity and an educational system that is as comprehensive for women as it is for men. In other words, I call for the government of all by all. Until we can achieve even greater simplification of form, the Commune represents that government."

This is an extremely important declaration, on several counts. First, because it is dated (June 28, 1871) and gives us an idea of what the most aware Communards were thinking in the immediate aftermath of their defeat. Second, because Louise Michel was to be true to this *credo* for the rest of her life. It already shows signs of her incipient anarchist convictions: "until we can achieve even greater simplification of form..."

She told Briot that the Commune had promoted the Social Republic through measures designed to ease the daily life of the people: the abolition of excessive salaries, increased wages for women workers, and the "tied mandate"* which bound the members of the Commune. Briot interrupted at this point, asking about the illegal arrests, the robberies... "The delegates to the Commune never ordered illegal arrests, or robberies, or pillage or arson," replied Louise. "To the best of my knowledge, everything they did was entirely legal."

She acknowledged having already been arrested twice, for taking part in demonstrations (it would have been useless to deny it). She was accused of being violent. "I'm not, but when

* literally, "imperative mandate" (*mandat impératif*): a system of political representation under which the person elected must conform to the program which he had proclaimed during the election campaign, rather than represent the subsequent wishes of his constituency — *transl. note*

I'm attacked, I fight back. For example, during that demonstration I was just talking about, a policeman grabbed me by my hat so I hit him back."

Captain Briot wagged his finger: "Nobody may flout the law. By acting as you have done, you are guilty of having aided the criminals who spread terror, destruction and death in our unfortunate capital. What have you to say to that?" She answered, "I acted according to my conscience and my convictions."

He asked what she was living on: "Have you an income?" Louise told him she taught drawing and music as well as her regular school classes, but refused, wisely, to give him her pupils' names.

And finally, the big question, the question that must be asked of all women, for women, as everyone knows, are the mere reflections of men. "Are you married?" "No." "Have you had intimate relations with a man?" continued the prosecutor, unblushing. "No. I have but one passion: the Revolution."¹²

Louise dissembled throughout this first interrogation. She acknowledged only what could not be denied and dodged as best she could her adversaries' most serious charge, that of having taken up weapons against Versailles. She can hardly be blamed for this caution — quite the reverse — but she was to rewrite this bit of her personal history most thoroughly in later years.

Captain Briot, ever the conscientious policeman, went looking for witnesses. He found a seamstress, Victorine David, who gave little satisfaction: Louise was an "exalted Republican," who had made her students sing the "Marseillaise" and didn't teach them their prayers. She had last seen Louise on May 24, when she said that she was going to offer herself as prisoner in her mother's place. Victorine David knew absolutely nothing of Louise's relations with members of the Commune.¹³ Then there was the concierge, Henriette Pierre, née Pompont, a polisher by trade, who could add little more: Louise had very few visitors and, apart from that, all she could say was that Louise was "a very good person."¹⁴ Mme Josse, who owned the house at 24 Rue Oudot where Louise and her mother had been living for the past three years, could only relate street gossip: "They say Louise Michel was very exalted; they say she didn't give her students a very Christian education... But as far as I could tell, she was a very good person, very

devoted.”¹⁵

The eighteenth arrondissement's delegate to the ministry of Public Instruction, M. de Fleurville,* ignored the possible consequences of “getting involved”: entirely at his own initiative, he sent written testimony to the Council of War about Louise Michel. This was a very courageous thing to do, for all those suspected of sympathizing with the communal movement were being actively harrassed. He praised the schoolteacher, tracing her career from the school on Rue des Cloys to the one on Rue Oudot: “Time and again, she would forgive the payment of a month's school fees by a family that was, in reality, more comfortably off than herself.” Louise spent every *sou* she had on others and sometimes she and her mother would go to bed without even a crust of bread in their stomachs. He recalled that Louise had taken in the old schoolteachers, Mlles Lhomme and Poulin, when they were sick, destitute and abandoned by everyone else. She helped everybody: unemployed workers, adults to whom she gave free literacy courses.¹⁶

Even in prison, her circumstances more reduced than ever, Louise continued to help others. She watched over a sick prisoner, since “we promised her daughter to keep an eye on her.” They would tell the daughter about her mother's condition, but in a way “not to increase the pain she already feels at their separation.”¹⁷ She did her best to exonerate the members of the Montmartre women's Vigilance Committee: the committee's sole concern had been to care for children, the old, the sick and the wounded.¹⁸ She was cited as a witness for the defence for Béatrix Excoffon, but not summoned to the courtroom, and so she sent her testimony in writing to the woman's lawyers: it was at her, Louise's, instigation that Béatrix, while president of the Boule-Noire Club, had called for the exchange of Commune-held prisoners for Blanqui (*not*, Louise stressed, for their execution, as was now being claimed). The motion calling for the demolition of the Vendôme Column had been similarly misrepresented: she had indeed suggested that it be melted down (along with the Bastille Column and a quantity of jewelry), but that was in order to pay the war indemnity being demanded by the Prussians.¹⁹ Moreover, the

* Louise Michel had attended the wedding of Mathilde, M. de Fleurville's daughter, to the poet Verlaine — *author's note*

presidents of the clubs had not been present at the meetings at which Louise had acted as secretary, so they could not be held responsible for motions voted in their absence. Louise alone was responsible.²⁰

She learned that Mme Richoux, convicted for having helped to erect a barricade,²¹ had been sentenced to deportation to a fortress, and offered a word of advice to her own prosecutor, Captain Briot: "I have noticed that you wish to see justice done, and I therefore permit myself to suggest that you mistrust the denunciations now being signed by poor wretches who are only trying to gain their own liberty..."²² Louise wanted to protect the women whose names had been found on the petitions calling for the creation of vocational schools, so she claimed that she herself had signed all those names, "so that the Revolution would be made for the people and by the people." As for the supposed women's brigades, the sum-total of their activity was one demonstration.²³

She turned to the prison chaplain, Abbé Folley, who was devoted to all the prisoners, Catholic or not, and asked him to be her "accomplice" in a secret "worthy of the confessional." Louise wanted to protect the virtue of a certain young girl who had just been acquitted and released, and she threw herself into the project with as much concern as did the priest and the nuns. "Try to prevent her from going to visit the officers at their station. I have reason to believe that she runs a risk greater than death itself. You should be able to set the nuns at the station on guard, without exactly telling them why."²⁴

Louise had good reason to trust Abbé Folley as she did. His willingness to play the go-between made it possible for her to correspond with Théophile Ferré. This clandestine exchange of letters between two atheist revolutionaries thanks to the good offices of a Catholic priest merely demonstrates that people of a certain nobility and worth, whatever their convictions, always recognize each other.

"Since as of today we are able to correspond with each other, my dear delegate, let my first words be ones of happiness. Let us talk." She reproached him for his antifeminist past: "I hope that you have ceased to be reactionary on the subject of women and now acknowledge their right to face both danger and death." That right, at least, they had been granted very fully indeed.²⁵ She described her arrest: "Scenes from Dante's *Inferno* or Callot's engravings pale by comparison" — and her

interrogation, where she had proclaimed her faith in the Commune, which she had served "because I sought the happiness of the people." She told him that she had said nothing in her own defence, except that she had acted "according to my conscience and my convictions." She closed her letter with a discreetly veiled word of tenderness: "Brother, shall we meet again? Shall we see our friends? But it doesn't matter... *Au revoir*, in this life or beyond it..."

The letter did run the risk of being read by a third party, but it still seems likely that it would have taken on quite another tone had there been anything between Théophile Ferré and Louise Michel other than the ties of comradeship (on his part) and platonic love (on hers). Louise couldn't let Ferré know of her great love; he was a prudish young man, this Commune delegate, and it would have shocked him a great deal.

Ferré had appeared before the Third Council of War. He had been charged with giving the order to hand General Lecomte over to the mob, setting fire to the Palace of Justice, being the author of an anonymous command to "set fire to the ministry of Finance" (which was, in fact, a forgery), and with directing the execution of hostages in the La Roquette courtyard. Many Commune members cut sorry figures before the councils of war, but Ferré defended himself with courage and dignity — or, as his enemies put it, "disgusting cynicism." His final statement before the Council of War was worthy of the man whom Louise loved, and deserves to be quoted: "I am a member of the Paris Commune and I am now in the hands of the victors. They want my head; let them take it. I shall never stoop to cowardice in an effort to save my life. I have lived a free man and I shall die the same way. I have nothing more to say. Fortune is always capricious. I entrust my memory and my vengeance to the Future." Ferré was sentenced to die on October 2. He refused to sign an appeal against the sentence.²⁶

From her own prison cell, Louise would first try to save his life, and then dedicate herself to his memory and his vengeance.

But first his life, for there was still time. Ferré had refused to sign an appeal on his own behalf; so be it. Louise took it on herself to write to the presiding judge of the Commission of Pardons: the men of the Commune, even at risk to their own lives, had done their utmost to maintain the highest standards of "honour and security" throughout Paris. No, the Commune bore no guilt. May the blood the accusers sought to shed

rebound against them! "Ferré's execution would be an affront to all men of good conscience. The reply would be revolution!"²⁷

But even while she tried to justify Ferré's behaviour, even as she threatened his would-be executioners with the consequences of their deed, she wanted to share his fate and join him at last, if only in death. "Let them free all those who are here by mistake; there are many such. And let them take, as they take the head of the delegate from Montmartre, the heads of all those who no longer wish to live." Now she acknowledged all her past actions, claimed her full responsibility: "I was much more a soldier than an ambulance nurse. I have the right to die, and I claim it."²⁸

Once again through the good offices of Abbé Folley, Louise managed to send Ferré a little cloth carnation (which she cut from her own red sash) and a poem:

*Si j'allais au noir cimetière,
Frères, jetez sur votre soeur
Comme une espérance dernière
De rouges oeilleux tout en fleur...*

She recalled that, under the Empire, this flower had been the symbol of hope and renewal for all republicans:

*Aujourd'hui, va fleurir dans l'ombre
Des noires et tristes prisons.
Va fleurir près du captif sombre
Et dis-lui que nous l'aimons...*

The word* had been spoken at last, but perhaps she meant nothing more than the collective and fraternal love of comrades-in-arms:

*Dis-lui par le temps rapide
Tout appartient à l'avenir,
Que le vainqueur au front livide
Plus que le vaincu peut mourir.*²⁹

Théophile's reply to this sentimental farewell was a calm and measured letter "to *citoyenne* Louise Michel, prisoner of State." He did, though, give his correspondent the pleasure of receiving from him a quotation from one of her own poems:

*Et nous dans nos rouges bannières
Enveloppons-nous pour mourir.
L.M. (Chants des morts)*

* i.e. "Nous l'aimons," we love him — *transl. note*

"I received your charming souvenir and I read with great interest your tender verse..." Ferré knew his situation, and he took it calmly. "Those who have sacrificed their lives to a great cause, as we have done, are strengthened by that act. Nothing can surprise or disturb us." He then offered a political analysis of the current situation. "The very intensity with which the victors are hounding their powerless adversaries is a sign of their own weakness." It meant that one must not lose hope. "Ideas gain ground in direct proportion to the degree of persecution brought to bear upon their supporters. They can't kill every last socialist, there are too many of us... And all those who survive will have become ardent disciples of the idea... So, the future is ours." After all these abstractions, he turned to Louise's own plight. Why had they not yet brought her before the "charming" councils of war? Why the delay? Then some advice. "Allow me to ask that you take good care of yourself, contrary to your usual habits. Don't allow our enemies to gain the impression that their prisons can harm you... Sincerely yours, dear *citoyenne*, and in devotion to Equality."³⁰ That was the tone of the letters that Louise received in her prison cell from the man she loved. I can almost see her reading and rereading those letters, trying to find between the lines some suggestion of personal feeling on the part of this young man of twenty-five for her, a woman of forty, and instead finding only the concern that might be expressed to any valued comrade. Nothing more.

With Abbé Folley's help, the correspondence was able to continue. Louise to Théophile, September 16, 1871, midnight: "To citizen Ferré."

Valsez, valsez comme des folles.

Pauvres feuilles, valsez, valsez...

"That refrain was going round and round in my head this morning. I've always liked that waltz very much, but now it breaks my heart." She knew she might be taking liberties in writing to him a second time, but would he please answer, if possible. She was a materialist, rationalist and atheist, but she was a mystic as well and she told Théophile of her dreams and premonitions. "I am now quite sure that I was not mistaken when I couldn't tell who was speaking to me about you, soul to soul." Which was reality, dreams or waking life? Passing time or eternity? "I have always thought that we could sense our destiny, as dogs can sense the presence of the wolf [her old

obsession], and sometimes what we have sensed in that confused way then comes, with strange exactitude, to pass." She told him about her experience the night she had stood guard in Montmartre cemetery. She would never forget that night, rich in portents, when life and death had met in the eternity of the instant. Louise wanted to believe in "a higher life," a supreme justice "that will not permit you, the only one whose spirit is as great as our cause, to be sacrificed..." She was very calm, she told him. She was affected by nothing but her separation from her mother and the anxiety this caused her. Why did he not describe for her his prison life? As she had once reproached Hugo, long ago: "Am I not enough of a sister to you that you might share your soul with me, as I have shared mine with you?" Then she reined herself in, after this near-declaration: "I won't reread this letter, for if I did I probably wouldn't send it. I'll keep writing instead." And she talked about New Caledonia.* What a beautiful trip it would be, with Ferré as companion. "We'd set sail in a winter storm," "the huge ship's sails swollen by the wind." Then: "but for all that to come to pass, you must live." Otherwise, she too wished only "the calm sleep of the dead."

Prisoners' imaginations often run riot; hers was no exception. Her childhood came back to her, a dream to counterpoint reality. "I could see the great oak forests of Haute-Marne, the old tumbledown chateau where I was raised and where I heard the wolves [again] howl in winter and the nightingales sing in summer." She interrupted her letter once again, this time to listen to "the spirit which speaks to me of you and which says, as I say, you must not die..."³¹ All this sentimentality must have exasperated its recipient. We can never know.

She complained of the chattering women who surrounded her: "There are times when I'd like to knock their heads together." How many more martyrs will it take before "the masses are ready for liberty?" She worried about Ferré's health. Was it true he was ill? But he must live, for the cause. She sent him the works of Thucydides. And the advice "of a wise elder sister": "Did you notice all the legal errors in your cursed trial?"³²

* an island in the South-west Pacific used by France as a penal colony — *transl. note*

She churned out an avalanche of letters and petitions — the only steps open to her in a prison cell — in her effort to save her beloved. She told Abbé Folley, "Ferré is neither a criminal nor an arsonist." She lied, quite deliberately: she later told her anarchist companion Girault that Ferré was indeed present at the murder of those hostages, there was even a photograph which showed him levelling his revolver.³³ (But which was the lie, the account she gave the priest or the one she gave Girault?) She wrote the newspapers: "He resisted all provocations, all traps..." But she wondered if there was still a press worthy of the name? "Is there anywhere in this dead city a paper which will publish the words of the category of dead known as 'prisoners'? Let there be no executions, or let them kill us all." She wrote to Mme Jules Simon: "I am sure you do not agree with this coldblooded cruelty. I loved you... May your husband's name not be identified with what is now taking place." She sent Marie Ferré to Victor Hugo, with a letter of introduction: Ferré "is the finest of us all, the most generous in triumph and the most dignified in defeat. That is why they have sentenced him to death. Save him, it would not be the first time you had cheated the gallows of its intended victim, nor will it be the last. Time is running out. I leave this in your hands." She appealed again to Abbé Folley: "Help us, I beg of you. For me, Ferré is the Revolution itself, merciful in victory and proud in defeat. All that I have seen of him is so great that I would give my own life a thousand times over for his." She asked the priest to pass on to Ferré, along with the Thucydides, a sketch of an ivy leaf, a significant plant for prisoners, representing as it does remembrance and faithfulness. She also asked him to keep, for Ferré, a drawing she had done of the gloomy chateau of Vroncourt.

Victor Hugo replied to her appeal and she pressed her case all the harder: "Since you are called to be the great conciliator after the slaughter, since you wish to mediate this terrible struggle, you undoubtedly already know the only course that is worthy both of you and of us... Let there be no coldblooded executions to follow those done in the heat of battle, or let them kill us all..." At the same time, she pleaded for the release of the victims of false arrest. Let them deport "fanatics" like Ferré and herself, but let the innocent go free.³⁴

She finally received an answer from Ferré, calm and reasonable as usual — a bit banal, in fact, not that it matters.

He thanked her for the description of her own arrest and expressed his relief that she had escaped the great slaughter. "Had the conquerors known that their prisoner was *citoyenne* Louise Michel, a dangerous enemy because she is a woman who will never waver in her convictions, then I am certain that I should never have had the satisfaction of making contact with you once again." (But, as we know, the officers to whom Louise surrendered in order to save her mother were well aware of her identity.) Fortunately, she had been spared, and a number of men "of courage and intelligence" had been spirited away to safety, so there was still hope for the future. "We have been beaten, but we shall have our revenge. And if not we, in person, then our brothers. What importance has it then, that I, for one, will not be present?" She was to take heart: "I beg you, let there be no traces in your future letters of the melancholy and sensitivity which seems to have taken possession of your spirit." Rather than brooding on the defeat, she was to recognize, as he did, that "socialism has never been more essential than it is now" and there were now too many republicans in France for the monarchy ever to be re-established, in any form whatsoever. "If my predictions are correct, those who survive the next few years will see very great changes take place. I hope that you number among them." He thanked her for the poem and the red carnation. That "charming gesture" had touched him a great deal and, in return, he sent her "his head" — that is, a photograph, with the inscription, "To *citoyenne* Louise Michel, in memory of a Communard." He couldn't have been more formally correct. But he did add a few words of advice concerning her own eventual appearance before the councils of war, words that show he rather feared the possible consequences of Louise's habitual state of exaltation. "I have no worry for your principles, but I should like to make these few observations. Force yourself to be calm enough to defeat their schemes; above all, beware your own generosity. Generosity has been severely devalued in our day, and it would make you its victim. The interests of our cause require that its supporters be at liberty; you can behave correctly, without being naive..." In short, she should do everything possible to get out of "this trap" as quickly as possible. To the person who had sent him the Thucydides, he sent this letter. Had she received it? "Sincerely yours and for Equality."³⁵

She was thrilled by this letter. It was reasoned and calm, but he did show some interest in her, at least as a militant for the same cause. "Brother, thank you. I am very happy. I promise to follow your advice."³⁶

The correspondence continued, always thanks to the priest. "He understands that there can be no exchange of ideas between the other female prisoners and myself. They have the usual strengths and weaknesses of womankind, and that is exactly what I do not have." She told him about the "ridiculous things these worthy prisoners of State are saying." Their well-intentioned minds were full of such nonsense "that their accusers should be ashamed of charging them with political activism." Just as George Sand showered contempt on the women of 1848, Pauline Roland, Jeanne Deroin, Eugénie Niboyet, so Louise Michel wanted to set herself apart from the other women of the Commune. She thought herself, because of her intelligence, closer to Ferré than to the other women. Not that intelligence is the way to make oneself loved, quite the contrary, but it is a common delusion of plain intelligent women. And sentimental, one might add: "I have promised myself, dear prisoner of ours [that discreet pronoun], not to write you in the dark moments when the soul is especially burdened. But I love these dark nights, I feel this is when I live most intensely and so I send you my thoughts." (This whole tone must have irritated Ferré a great deal.) Then she pulled back to less dangerous ground. Her interrogation, she told him, had been "very benevolent." She had told them that Ferré, far from being the assassin and arsonist of their official condemnation, in fact had tried to prevent the murders and the fires. That day, as Captain Briot had escorted her to the door "with certain signs of consideration," she was sure she had seen (or perhaps just imagined) tears in his eyes.³⁷

She learned that there would be no review of Ferré's trial. Like a wasp furiously buzzing at the windowpane, she sat in her cell and pressed her campaign on his behalf even more intensely than before. To free him, she accused herself. She told the Commission of Pardons that it was she who had wanted revenge for the murdered prisoners, the ambulance nurses who were raped before being killed; she who had suggested to Ferré that they blow up the buildings that had been retaken by the Versaillaise, that they fight on the ramparts to the bitter end, that they execute the hostages. But Ferré had replied, she told

them, that "crimes against humanity would be a sign of cowardice on the part of the Commune and as long as he still stood, they would not be committed. We had a long and heated argument. His last words were an attempt to stave off the executions, which would only damn our cause for the future without saving it for the present." And then a cry straight from the heart: "I am more guilty than he..."³⁸ She again begged Abbé Folley to proclaim Ferré's innocence, since in all of "dead, cowardly" Paris there was no-one else to raise a voice in his defence. "They might listen to you. There is still time."³⁹ She wrote Hugo, enclosing copies of the letters she had sent to the judges. He was her last hope: "Now that republicans are being executed by the Republic and Paris is mute since there isn't a spirit left alive in the whole slaughterhouse," let Hugo be the one to proclaim aloud that it was now the turn of the revolutionary women to be silenced. Why wouldn't they take her to trial? Why wouldn't they deport the revolutionaries? Why wouldn't they set the innocent free? She shook with rage and shame: "Dear Master, I don't know how I manage to write this letter..." Her mind swayed under the pressures of her emotions: "Should they commit these unspeakable deeds, O Revolution my love, I shall avenge you and there will never have been such vengeance."⁴⁰ She even wrote to Toulain, the engraver who had been elected deputy for the Seine and who had then condemned the Commune. She would take no steps to save herself, but she would do anything, even this, to save Ferré. And so she flattered and cajoled this man for whom she could in fact have felt nothing but contempt. "It would be a great act on your part were you to help us now." She gave him Victor Hugo's address (then living with Paul Meurice), so that they might make contact.⁴¹

Having done what she could to reach every level of French society with her appeal, she now called on all the nations of the world, "in the name of civilization,"⁴² to protest the intended executions. Then she threatened M. Thiers himself: "I warn you that should a single execution take place, certain documents obtained from your home and other sources will immediately be released to the public, with full and appropriate publicity."⁴³ Louise had discussed these supposedly incriminating documents with a fellow-prisoner, a certain Mme Leroy. Louise's great confidence, however, had this time been misplaced, for Mme Leroy had not only been the mistress of a member of the

Commune (Urbain) but simultaneously of a Versailles agent as well (Barral de Montaud). The woman told the authorities all about these documents during her interrogation: "Fortunately, her information was incorrect."⁴⁴ Louise, who knew nothing of all this, asked Abbé Folley to supply Me Ducoudray, the lawyer, with a copy of the letters she had sent M. Thiers; she hoped to convince the chief of state that her threat was a serious matter. Publishing these documents would only be the start of a "terrible revenge."⁴⁵ Did those documents really exist? If they did, they were so very carefully hidden away that they've never since been found. So we can never know if Louise had a real weapon in her hands, or if it was all a last, desperate bluff.

Yet this storm of action (for the letters were a form of action, after all) wasn't enough for Louise. Ever since childhood, Louise had used poetry as the spillway for the torrents of disgust, indignation and despair that sometimes overwhelmed her. And so:

*Sur le cadran brisé, sinistres sont les jours,
Passez, passez, passez, passez toujours.
Emportez tout, les haines, les amours.
Tout est fini, les forts, les braves,
Tous sont tombés, O mes amis...*

And yet,

*Nous reviendrons, foule sans nombre
Nous viendrons par tous les chemins.*⁴⁶

In another poem, she savaged Versailles, "that old whore," with its unchecked appetite for prisons, soldiers and pretty girls, while

*La ville où bat le coeur du monde,
Paris dort du sommeil des morts.*⁴⁷

She passed solemn judgment on the members of the Councils of War, the men responsible for Ferré's death sentence:

*Cassaigne, Mauguet, Guibert, Berlin, bourreau,
Gaveau, Gaveau*

Léger, Gaulet, Labat, taïaut, taïut...

But take care, for "the dead are quickly mounting," their number becomes so great:

*Vous ne voyez pas sur le seuil
L'avenir qui déchire l'ombre...*⁴⁸

She rages,

*Laissez-nous partir tous ensemble
Dans les tempêtes de l'hiver...*

And she warns that they must all be exiled, or all be killed. Let the victors make no mistake:

*Que si vous en frappez un seul,
Il faudra, poursuivant vos crimes,
Sur tous étendre le linceul...⁴⁹*

For, if not:

*La mer des révolutions
Vous emportera dans sa crue...⁵⁰*

*Car toujours nous renaîtrons, et toujours nous reviendrons:
Passons, passons les mers, passons les noirs vallons,
Passons, que les blés murs tombent dans les sillons.⁵¹*

This idea of the eternal cycle of death and rebirth runs through all her poetry. It was the bedrock of her faith. The individual may perish, but is born again in all men: as the seed must die to give us the kernel, the kernel must be broken to give us the grain, the grain must be ground to give us bread; as the grape must be crushed to give us wine. These are old, simple, universal images, the images of man as part of nature. Louise would cling to them, use them, throughout her entire life, as her credo of the Revolution which is itself both destruction and a new beginning. "If the grain didn't die..."

VII - THE VERDICT

Though Louise was preoccupied with the fate of the defeated Commune partisans in general, and that of Ferré in particular, she had still her own role to play. Captain Briot did not call her for a second interrogation until September 19. By then, Ferré had been condemned to death, so she had nothing more to lose but her own life and no desire to save it. At this interrogation, then, no more evasions or distortions. If anything, she swung to the opposite extreme. Though she had previously insisted that her only work had been that of an ambulance nurse, in fact she was a soldier of the Commune as well. "Were you not wounded in a skirmish with the forces of order?" asked Captain Briot. "Once I slipped while running into a gulley to save a wounded National Guard and suffered a sprain. That incident must have led to the reports that I had been injured."

"According to police reports, you took part in the fighting in Asnières and in Neuilly," continued the captain. "I fought at Issy, Clamart and Montmartre," "What were your weapons?" "At Issy, I used a sabre to rally the Federals. In Clamart, I took a dead man's gun and in Montmartre, I found a gun on the ground."

"Did you belong to the International?" "Yes. [This is by no means certain, since Louise was now ready to accuse herself of any charge they wanted to suggest.] But there is no point questioning me further on this subject; I shall not answer."¹

Louise was fortunate: she lived in that brief moment be-

tween the abolition of torture in all civilized countries (at the end of the 18th century) and its re-introduction. Our contemporary world has greatly improved on the traditional methods, but Captain Briot, in his world, would have considered himself dishonoured by any attempt to "make his prisoners talk." Louise had a great deal of respect for this captain. After her interrogation, she wrote him a note: "You are an honest man, so try to do the honest things: set free the ones who are suffering (the innocent) and send the rest of us, the fanatics, into exile." He was already aware of her song, "Les Vengeurs" (which had been introduced into evidence against her); now she sent him their "Chant de mort ou de départ" (which was even more damning). And finally, she begged him to pay absolutely no attention to any interventions being attempted on her behalf.²

For Louise was becoming a figure of great importance in the continuing trials. She had figured — unbeknownst to herself — in the September 3 trial of the *pétroleuses*. By and large, they were poor, ignorant and unsophisticated women, quite incapable of defending themselves in any way other than by simply denying the charges brought against them. The public prosecutor for their trial, Captain Jouenne, summed up his indictment with a general condemnation of this attempt by women to play a role in history and a quite particular condemnation of Louise Michel. "...Some of these women, and I reluctantly allow them the dignity of the title, cannot be excused on the grounds of ignorance. They are schoolteachers, they cannot pretend to be unaware of the concepts of good and evil..." And among those schoolteachers, he singled out "that Michel woman," who took the hymns out of the schools and brought in the "Marseillaise" and the "Chant du départ".* Her trial, therefore, would be of the greatest importance.³

News travels slowly in prison, so it was not until two months later that Louise learned of this calumny. She took up her pen once again, this time in her own defence, and wrote the president of the Fourth Council of War, Colonel Gaillard, demanding that her trial begin. "Colonel, the indictment in the Réitiffe affair** constitutes a serious personal affront. You

* damning evidence indeed. Consider this chorus from "Le Chant du départ":
The Republic calls us We must conquer or die A Frenchman must live for
the Republic For Her he must die.

** Elizabeth Réitiffe, one of the women tried collectively for arson on September 3 — *transl. notes*

cannot be unaware of the terms in which [Captain Jouenne] spoke of 'that Michel woman' who has yet to appear before you, whose case is of such paramount importance..."⁴ Two days later, she sent Lieutenant Seriot a copy of all her declarations. "Even should their response be to transfer me to another prison, I am counting on you to make sure that these declarations are entered in my dossier. They may kill me if they wish, but they may not blacken my reputation."⁵

She received no reply, but she was indeed transferred to the Arras prison. The reasons for this transfer are not clear, though she claims in her *Mémoires* that her correspondence with Ferré had been discovered and, as a consequence, the prefecture of police had demanded her transfer.⁶ She added, in her book *La Commune*, "I have now learned that old Clément was behind this infamy."⁷ And perhaps, too, it was the affair of the supposed "documents" with which she had threatened to compromise M. Thiers.

Whatever the reasons for the transfer, Louise objected to it: "I have the right to stay here in Versailles (where I can receive visits from my mother) while awaiting my appearance before the Council of War, to which I also have a right." She had been publicly insulted; she demanded therefore the right to defend herself in public, "even if the judges shrink from the inconvenience of being faced by a woman who is truly devoted to the Commune and its cause." Anyway, one day she would be judged "by the people." And above everything else, she wished it to be quite clear that she was not one of those women who would buy their freedom by making convenient declarations or by serving as police spies. (An allusion to Mme Leroy and the "documents." Louise says, "I was quite aware of her intrigues, but for a long time I refused to believe it." Yet she doesn't even mention this whole business in her *Mémoires*.) So now she demanded a cell in Versailles and "judgment or death; both if you wish."⁸ She wrote General Appert as well, along the same lines.⁹

It wasn't that she was being ill-treated in her new prison. She even thought "the black sisters* very agreeable. It's just that I'd rather be with the ones whom I already know. I shall never agree with them, but I shall always love them." Indeed, in all her prisons, Louise would always get along very well with

* i.e. the nuns — *transl. note*

these women who, like herself, had chosen to serve an Absolute — even if it was not the same one. The nuns reciprocated. They always found Louise had a beneficial effect on the other prisoners. Yet Louise arrived in Arras in a state of despair: "Prisons and death are nothing, it's the anxiety about the fate of others..." She turned once again to Abbé Folley, asked him to tell her mother* how she was getting on.

Louise raged at the delays, yet the wheels were all the while turning in their own slow and tortuous way. Captain Briot, being an exceedingly conscientious man, was doing the best he could to understand the strange personality before him. The mayor of Vroncourt was contacted, who recalled that Louise had been very carefully raised by Mme Demahis herself. "In her Vroncourt days, she was a very devoted girl. Really, she always conducted herself in such a manner as to win public esteem."¹¹ The Chaumont public prosecutor also sent testimony: she had received a "good education," many of her poems had been published in the local papers but "they weren't at all political." Indeed, "no proceedings, political or otherwise, were ever brought against this young lady."¹² The mayors of the different municipalities where Louise had taught school all said much the same thing, and made no reference at all to the malicious gossip of which Louise claimed to have been the target. In Audeloncourt, she "taught the young girls and was herself a model of good conduct. She enjoyed general public esteem."¹³ The mayor of Clefmont noted that she had indeed written some poetry but no reproach could be brought against her morals or her integrity. Still, he added, they'd always thought her something of a "daydreamer."¹⁴ The mayor of Millières wrote: "To my knowledge, she did not, during her stay in this municipality, publish anything of a political nature." True, she had sent poems to Victor Hugo, one of them concerning "the death of Mgr Affre on a barricade." The mayor was wrong, for Louise had written about the death of a different monseigneur entirely, Mgr. Sibour, who was killed by a priest in the church of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont. He added, however, that Louise Michel did have the reputation of suffering from a "vivid and somewhat exalted imagination."¹⁵

Despite the innocuous nature of this testimony, Captain

* who was staying with her cousin, Léon Galès, a shirtmaker at 164-166 Rue Saint-Honoré, facing the Louvre — *author's note*¹⁰

Briot slowly came to the conclusion that "Louise Michel had done at least as much as the members of the Commune, particularly Ferré, whom she defends energetically and for whom she has too much esteem for us to suppose that nothing of a serious or intimate nature ever took place between them." He had now established her participation in the attack on the legitimate government and in the call to civil war. But he did not yet know the extent of her role in the events of March 18 and in the assassinations of Generals Lecomte and Thomas. He therefore ordered the police superintendent to determine the degree of her participation in the Rue des Rosiers committee, her behaviour during their meetings, her role in the revolutionary clubs and, finally, her relations with Ferré.¹⁶

In vain. The superintendent discovered nothing.¹⁷

A patient man, Captain Briot interrogated his witnesses once again. Mme Josse, the proprietor, suddenly remembered that Louise Michel, dressed as a National Guard, had spent the night of March 17-18 on La Butte-Montmartre. "I met her mother the next day in the street. She was crying, she said she had gone looking for her daughter on the Butte, but Louise wouldn't listen to her." Mme Josse knew nothing about the assassination of the generals, "but I think Louise Michel was very influential in the National Guard, both in action and in political developments in Montmartre." And she also remembered having seen those pictures of Louise bearing the inscription, "Ferré's mistress."¹⁸

Mlle Emilie Potin, a painter, had only one thing to tell them: she'd done Louise favours (taught in her stead, once, for six weeks) and then Louise had turned around and denounced her brother, Jules Potin, for shirking his duty as a National Guard. It had been very painful. Apart from that, well...she'd heard that Louise Michel would wave to the crowds from a carriage just as if she were a queen: "She's an arrogant woman who was probably trying to win some glory for her name." Ferré? "I don't think she ever had relations with that member of the Commune, or any other man. Her conduct was acceptable enough, even if her style of dress left something to be desired."¹⁹

The concierge, Henriette Pompont, could also now dredge up some damning memories. "She spent the nights of March 17 and 18 away from home and then she came back dressed as a National Guard. I never saw her carry a weapon, however. She

did mention to me once that if M. Clemenceau had arrived at Rue des Rosiers just instants sooner the generals wouldn't have been killed, because the mayor opposed their execution and that was because he sided with Versailles." The concierge, Rue des Rosiers, didn't know what Louise had done, "but in my soul and my conscience, I believe she was probably mixed up in it [the assassinations], because she had a very exalted temperament and she was always one of the leaders of whatever was going on."

"But why didn't you question her further?" asked Captain Briot. "Oh, she was never in the same place two moments running. You never dreamed of trying to hold a conversation with her." "Had she intemperate habits?" continued the captain. "No, though she was always drinking black coffee." As for any friendships or liaisons, the only people who came to Louise's apartment were her students' parents. Henriette Pompont knew nothing about Louise Michel and Théophile Ferré.

"And the hostages?" "I heard her say," replied the concierge, "that unless they turned Blanqui over to the Commune, the priests would be killed." Then, for her grand climax, Mme Pompont returned to the subject of the generals' deaths: "If Louise Michel was there when they killed those generals, then she would have been one of the people urging them on. She was far too exalted to have tried to prevent the crime."²⁰

Louise's assistant schoolmistress, Malvina Poulain (described for whatever curious reasons as a "street pedlar" in the report), declared that Louise had never taken her into her confidence, but that she could say Louise didn't receive men in her apartment. She thought the rumours about Louise's relationship with Ferré highly unlikely. "People always said she fought as hard as a man."²¹

Captain Briot listened to all these statements, and was particularly interested in what the concierge had had to say about Georges Clemenceau. He asked the head of the Sûreté to order a new inquiry. They would have to hurry, however, for he had been told "to wrap up this important affair."²²

Meanwhile, Louise paced her Arras cell. What was happening to Ferré? "No newspapers, no news of any kind." A torn fragment of a paper fell into her hands, its date and headline ripped away, which described Satory Plain, scene of

Ferré's execution. "No! It can't be! They wouldn't dare!..." Her rising anger was mingled with despair and threats of vengeance: "Very well, gentlemen, if you have indeed done this, I swear to you, I'll invite Dante to invent your fate." And then, in a mixture of courage and tenderness: "It's nothing to take one's own death lightly. But the death of others..."²³

The night of November 26-27, almost as if by some premonition, Louise was unable to sleep. "Oh, storm of the night! A sinister wind blows through my window, speak to me, are you the voice of the dead or of the future?" And then, the cry of a woman in love: "O tempest, when one is on the very steps of the gallows, how one loves!"²⁴ Her emotions found relief in verse as well, and she wrote this poem attacking the republic that was no better than the Empire had been:

*Ce fantôme de République
Qui frappe ses plus fiers enfants,
Va voir sur la place publique
Les Bonaparte triomphants...*

The Bonapartes, in triumphant return, would destroy

Nous et l'homme de Transnonain.^{*25}

The terrible November days when Ferré, Rossel and Bourgeois all awaited their end: Ferré with dignity, Rossel with grandeur, Bourgeois with courage. The condemned men were awakened early in the morning of November 28, and given time to write their final messages. Rossel wrote to his parents, his sisters and his grandmother. Ferré, in the adjoining cell, wrote to his sister Marie and to Louise.

"To Marie Ferré, Tuesday, November 28, 1871, five-thirty in the morning. My dear sister, I am about to die; your face will be the last image in my mind. I beg you to ask for my body and to reunite it in death with that of our unfortunate mother. If you can, please put a notice in the papers about the interment so that friends may attend. No religious ceremonies, of course; I die a materialist, as I have lived... Try to nurse our brother back to health and console our father. Tell them both how very much I love them. I embrace you with my whole heart and thank you all for all the attention you have lavished on me. Do not let yourself grieve... I am happy: my sufferings will end, and I have no cause to complain." Then a postscript, which

* Thiers was the "man of Rue Transmonain" for, as minister of the Interior, he was responsible for the savage repression of Paris workers in 1834, during the reign of Louise-Philippe — *transl. note*

directed that his personal belongings be returned to her and his money distributed to the most needy of the other prisoners.²⁶

Ferré next wrote to Louise. "Six o'clock. Dear *citoyenne*, I shall soon take my leave of all those who have been dear to me and who have shown me their affection... It would be remiss of me not to tell you now of the esteem I have for your character and your great generosity. You are more fortunate than I, you will yet enjoy better days and the triumph of the ideas for which I have made the total sacrifice. Farewell, dear *citoyenne*, I shake your hand in fraternity. Your devoted Th. Ferré, on his last day."²⁷

Little enough, and yet it was to Louise that Ferré addressed his last letter. We know already that he was no literary stylist, that emotion was never allowed to break through the measured calm of his sentences. Ferré probably did feel for Louise great respect and friendship, but nothing resembling the great love which she bore for him and of which he must surely have been aware.

Everything was now ready for the horrors which Louise had so long been dreading. Three police vans left the prison of Versailles shortly before seven o'clock, with Rossel and the priest, Passa, in the first, Sergeant Bourgeois and Abbé Folley in the second, and Ferré in the third, all alone.

Six thousand soldiers had gathered on Satory Plain for this great military and patriotic ceremony. The three condemned men climbed their three gallows and had kerchiefs tied over their eyes. At the last moment, Ferré pulled his off and stared at the men about to kill him.

"Fire!"

Rossel was dead, the others had to be dispatched. A dog appeared from nowhere to lick Ferré's face.

The next day, Louise was returned from Arras to Versailles. At the police station she saw Marie, who had come to claim her brother's body, and the women were able to exchange a few words.²⁸ So. It had happened. "At least," wrote Louise, "there was one brave enough not to beg his butchers for mercy... He did well. He saved the honour of the Revolution."²⁹ But she asked herself bitterly, "Why was there only one protest demonstration, attended by a few students, and in commemoration of Rossel alone? [She was wrong: there had been mass demonstrations honouring Ferré as well.] How can Paris allow her deputies to be slaughtered like this? Are

Parisians afraid "they'll compromise themselves?"³⁰ She wrote General Appert once again, in the most provocative language at her disposal: "I am slowly coming to believe that the triple assassination of last Tuesday morning really did take place. If you want to pass judgment on me, you have quite enough information in hand. I am ready, and Satory Plain is near. You all know full well that if I leave this place alive, I shall avenge the martyrs, Long live the Commune!"³¹ She wanted to die. "Nobody, who has not experienced this great emptiness himself, can imagine what courage it takes to go on living."³² This courage now failed her. Louise had become a desperate, human, vulnerable woman.

But fortunately, the interrogations began once again. Now she could confront her enemies, answer them and fight — not for her own skin, but for the cause which she and Ferré had both defended and which was now the only thing left to her. This time, she gave a full account of her revolutionary action; in fact, a fuller account than strict truth would have required.

Yes, she'd been present when the generals were arrested. "I shouted, 'Don't let them go!' But I never thought for a single moment that they would die. It's just that I was furious that they had given an order to fire on the people."

She didn't remember having been in the house on Rue des Rosiers during their executions. "But I remember saying to members of the Vigilance Committee, and to Ferré among others, because he disapproved of that kind of violence, 'They died well.'"

Yes, she had fully intended to assassinate Thiers and it was Ferré who had changed her mind. "I wanted to terrify the Assembly and bring an end to the fighting. I was convinced that Thiers was the heart and soul of that struggle." (Louise exalted tyrannicide throughout her life.)

Yes, she had chaired the revolutionary club which met originally on Grand-Rue de la Chapelle, Justice de Paix and later in the church of Saint-Bernard. And who had chaired the meetings when she was away being an ambulance nurse? "Different people."

She had issued various policy statements, whose expressions sometimes became a bit twisted in the transmission. Yes, that was her text which had been published in *Le Cri du Peuple*, May 15, 1871, concerning public worship, the magistracy and hostages. But she had not suggested the hostages be executed,

she had written only of "the threat" to execute hostages.

And what about the "fireworks" in her draft article, *L'Ombre*? "Come forth from your grave, O Republic. Come see the whore being passed off in your name... Let the wicked rejoice in this infamous peace... Rejoice, light your fireworks; we shall light ours..."³³ Louise explained, "I meant that death and destruction was preferable to such infamy."

Briot learned that conventional morality did not guide Louise Michel. "When I was writing my various manifestos, I almost always attached to them the names of good working-class women so that these women would be associated with ideas about education and the dignity of woman." "But that's extremely serious. Those forgeries seriously compromised those women." "That never occurred to me. I never thought those women would end up in court just for that."

Louise's political naiveté is obvious and so is the reason why she worked so hard to exonerate these women: it was her thoughtlessness which had incriminated them in the first place.

As for the famous fires: "I proposed that we dig ourselves in and fight to the death."

Louise also took responsibility for the manifesto of the central committee of the Union of Women for the Defence of Paris and Aid to the Wounded — even though, in fact, the group had been founded and run by Marx's friend, Elizabeth Dmitrieff. Either Louise wanted to give herself a little extra importance or she was trying to shield the others. Or both.

She was already the subject of myth-making. "Did you not once ride in a funeral procession in a carriage which was drawn not by horses, but by some National Guards?" "I would never have permitted that. If I was in a carriage at all, it was because I had a game leg."

And the denunciations she had been accused of making? "I denounced one friend [Jules Potin], whom I had already warned, and only because I knew nothing would happen to him."

Finally, she had never been anybody's mistress. Ferré was an "indomitable" revolutionary for whom she had felt only great trust and affection.³⁴

Louise also trusted this captain who had been interrogating her over the months and so she asked him, since he would be the one to prepare her charge-sheet, "to do something that would in no way violate his conscience," namely: to leave

the Demahis name out of this whole business, "for it would just invite *Le Figaro* to go raking through old family history." Her own life, however, was an open book.³⁵ Captain Briot granted her request. The name "Demahis" was never pronounced during the entire trial.³⁶

On December 10, Briot submitted his findings.³⁷ On December 16, at long last, Louise Michel came before the Fourth Council of War. She was dressed entirely in black, as usual, and she threw back her veil with an abrupt gesture, to stare fixedly at the assembled judges. Louise was a great actress: her role for this court martial was that of the Revolution Incarnate, and she played it extremely well. Perfectly in command of herself, she refused the assistance of the court-appointed lawyer, Me Haussmann, and listened impassively to the reading of the charges brought against her: membership in the International (doubtful), presence on Rue des Rosiers when the generals were killed (also doubtful), responsibility for the organization of the Union of Women (false), participation in the motions voted by the revolutionary club and participation in the armed struggle.

Her sole motivation: pride. As in the case of Rossel, the military judges could find no other explanation for revolutionary action aimed at destroying such an admirable society.

"She was an illegitimate child raised by acts of charity, yet, instead of thanking Providence which had granted her an above-average education and the means to live in peace with her mother, she instead gave free rein to her exalted imagination, her difficult character. Having broken all ties with her benefactors [naturally enough, since they were dead], she went to Paris, seeking adventure... She had close connections with the members of the Commune and was kept well-informed of all their plans. She helped them wholeheartedly and to the full extent of her powers; she often went even further than they did..." And then came the words that must have filled her with savage pride and despair: "She is as guilty as Ferré," "the proud Republican" whom she defended so stubbornly and whose death, to borrow her own words, "would be an affront to all men of good conscience and answered by revolution."

Louise therefore was charged with: first, criminal attempt to overthrow the government; second, incitement to civil war; third, having borne arms and a uniform in an insurrectional movement and having made use of those arms; fourth, written

fraud, at her own initiative; fifth, the use of a false document; sixth, complicity in the assassination of hostages; seventh, complicity in illegal arrests, these being crimes provided for in articles 87, 91, 150, 151, 59, 60, 302, 34 and 344 of the Penal Code and article 5 of the Law of May 24, 1834.³⁸

Louise listened without emotion except for one momentary flicker of a smile. "What have you to say in your defence?" asked the presiding judge.

"I don't wish to defend myself; I don't wish to be defended. I am devoted to the Social Revolution and I declare that I accept full responsibility for all my actions. I do this entirely, and without reservation. You charge me with participation in the assassination of generals? To that I reply: had I been present in Montmartre when they ordered the soldiers to fire on the people, I would not have hesitated a moment to fire on those who would give such orders. Once they were prisoners, however, I would never countenance their being shot. It would be an act of cowardice.

"As for the fires, the arson: yes, I was involved. I wanted to throw up a barrier of flames between ourselves and the Versailles invaders. I had no accomplices. I acted of my own accord.

"It is also charged that I aided the Commune. That is entirely true, for the Commune's highest goal was the Social Revolution, and the Social Revolution is the dearest of my ideals. I did all I could do to promote the Commune, but the Commune played no role — and you know it full well — in either the assassinations or the arson. I attended every one of their meetings in City Hall [false: Louise was on the battlefield] and I declare that there was never any discussion of assassination or of arson."

And now Louise was truly provocative: "Would you like to know who was really guilty? The police. Perhaps some day what really happened will be revealed, but it's obvious that for now the supporters of the Social Revolution will be blamed... But I'll not defend myself, I've already told you that. You are to judge me, you sit there before me, your masks stripped away. You are men, I am only a woman; yet I look you in the eye. I am quite aware that there is nothing I could say that would change a word in the sentence you will soon pronounce. So then, just one last thing. Our only goal was the triumph of the principles of the Revolution; I swear that by our martyrs who fell on Satory

Plain. I honour them today, and someday they will be avenged.

"I am yours. Do as you please. Take my life. I am not the sort of woman who would spend even one minute disputing it with you." ³⁹

The audience was stunned by the contrast between Louise Michel and the poor trembling, terrified women who had stood there before her, or the men who had tried so hard to weasel an acquittal from their judges. One spectator remarked, "It takes very deep convictions to remain unmoved in the face of such charges, a character of steel not to cringe before the responsibility for such acts." ⁴⁰

The court then heard the explanations which Louise had already provided to Captain Briot in her interrogations, and the testimony of the witnesses. The concierge repeated her few snippets but Mme Josse, who probably had no wish to condemn Louise, conveniently lost her memory once again.

The public prosecutor then withdrew all the accusations, except the one about carrying weapons during an insurrectionary movement. Nonetheless, he said the accused posed a permanent danger to society and asked that the Council of War remove her from it. Given Louise's official wishes in the matter, Me Haussmann forfeited the right to enter a plea on her behalf, and threw her on the wisdom of the Council.

"Accused, have you anything to say in your defence?"

The superb actress rose, and once again played her role with eloquence and distinction. She spoke as the voice of the Revolution, but also as a woman in love who wanted to share the fate of the man she had loved so much.

"To you who call yourselves the Council of War, who permit yourselves to sit over me as my judges, who at least do not meet in secret like the Commission of Pardons for you are military men and deliver your judgments in public, to you, then, I make one request: Satory Plain. My brothers have already fallen there. You have been told you must remove me from society. Well then! The public prosecutor is right. Since it appears that any heart which beats for liberty has only one right, and that is to a bit of lead, I ask you for my share." She went on: "If you permit me to live, I shall never cease to cry for vengeance, I shall never cease to call on my brothers to wreak vengeance on the assassins of the Commission of Pardons."

The presiding judge was shocked. "I cannot allow you to

go on in that vein." And the tragic heroine made a reply worthy of Corneille or Hugo: "I have finished. Kill me — unless you are too cowardly to do so."⁴¹

Emotion swept the room. The Council of War refused Louise the death sentence she had sought and sentenced her instead to deportation to a fortress. As usual, she had twenty-four hours in which to submit an appeal. "No!" cried Louise, "No appeal. But I would have preferred death."

This tragedy, played to the hilt by a superb actress, had Paris buzzing. The newspaper *Le Voleur* compared Louise to Théroigne de Méricourt* and began speculating about this Commune agitator who had been a "loved and esteemed" schoolteacher as well. What were people to make of it all? "Her imperturbable demeanour frustrated that spirit of observation which seeks to read the sentiments of the human heart."⁴² *Le Figaro* snidely raised the issue of Mme Jules Simon, wife of the minister of Public Instruction: "Is it true that the charming schoolteacher who answers to the name of Louise Michel sat on those notorious commissions, chaired by Mme Jules Simon, which established materialist republican instruction for the schools? And is it true that the good wife of M. the minister of Public Instruction very seriously considered asking M. Thiers to pardon Louise Michel?"⁴³

Victor Hugo wrote a long poem, *Viro Major*, which praised the tragic figure of Louise Michel:

*Ayant vu le massacre immense, le combat,
Le peuple sur sa croix, Paris sur son grabat,
La pitié formidable était dans tes paroles;
Tu faisais ce que font les grandes âmes folles
Et lasse de lutter, de rêver, de souffrir,
Tu disais: «J'ai tué», car tu voulais mourir.
Tu mentais contre toi, terrible et surhumaine.*

And, having invoked "the sombre Jewess" Judith, Aria la Romaine:

*Tu disais aux greniers: «J'ai brûlé les Palais.»
Tu glorifiais ceux qu'on écrase et qu'on foule.*

* Anne Joseph Théroigne de Méricourt (1762 - 1817): an "Amazon of liberty" and familiar of the revolutionary club of the Cordeliers, founded 1790, but loyal to the Girondists who were toppled in 1793 (by, among others, the members of the club of the Cordeliers). She was publicly whipped by a crowd of women after the fall of the Girondists and died insane, years later, in La Salpêtrière

— *transl. note*

*Tu criais: «J'ai tué. Qu'on me tue.» Et la foule
Écoutait cette femme altière s'accuser...
Tu semblais envoyer au sépulcre un baiser.
Ton oeil fixe pesait sur les juges livides.
Et tu songeais, pareille aux graves Euménides.
La pâle mort était debout derrière toi...*

The hall was shocked for, said Hugo, "The people hate civil war."

*Dehors on entendait la rumeur de la ville.
Cette femme écoutait la vie aux bruits confus,
D'en haut, dans l'attitude austère de refus.*

She seemed to see one thing only:

Qu'un pilori dressé pour une apothéose.

And then the judges, murmuring among themselves:

..Qu'elle meure. C'est juste.

*Elle est infâme. — A moins qu'elle ne soit auguste,
Disait leur conscience...*

And they hesitated, "looking at the stern and guilty one." And then, in his own way, Victor Hugo answers for her. After all, he had known this woman twenty years, ever since the far-off days in Vroncourt when she had sent him her childhood poems. He draws an attractive (and fair) picture of her:

*Et ceux qui, comme moi, te savent incapable
De tout ce qui n'est pas héroïsme et vertu...
Ceux qui savent tes vers mystérieux et doux,
Tes jours, tes nuits, tes soins, tes pleurs donnés à tous,
Ton oubli de toi-même à secourir les autres,
Ta parole semblable aux flammes des apôtres.
Ceux qui savent le toit sans feu, sans air, sans pain,
Le lit de sangle avec la table de sapin,
Ta bonté, ta fierté de femme populaire,
L'âpre attendrissement qui dort sous ta colère...
Ceux-là, femme, devant ta majesté farouche
Méditaient...*

And, despite all the accusations that she had heaped on herself:
Voyaient resplendir l'ange à travers la méduse.

And this was the cause of the uncertainty that she always left in her wake:

*Tu fus haute et semblas étrange en ces débats.
Car, chétifs, comme sont les vivants d'ici-bas,
Rien ne les trouble plus que deux âmes mêlées,
Que le divin chaos des choses étoilées*

*Aperçu tout au fond d'un grand coeur inclément,
Et qu'un rayonnement vu dans un flamboiement...*⁴⁴

It's a penetrating analysis, practically a psychoanalysis. Louise really did have two natures in one and that was the essence of her undeniable human richness: nothing about her was simple, or routine, or mediocre. Her true dimensions are revealed only by this contradictory mixture of Revolution and charity.

Now she could look forward to her departure and so she tried to put her affairs in some semblance of order. In August, she gave Marianne full power of attorney so that she could claim the monies still owed by the municipality of Montmartre for classes taught in January and February and could also sell off the student-list from the school.⁴⁵ Louise wrote Marianne a comforting letter, full of the very real love that she felt toward the old woman (and yet for whom she would never sacrifice her higher ideals, since life is not an end in itself and cannot be simply doubled back upon those who gave it to you in the first place). "I beg you, do not torment yourself. Look after yourself so that, upon my return, I may see you again. I can bear everything else, but not that... Take heart and above all, take care, that I may see you again. I am not going far and I shall be all right." She promised that Abbé Folley would keep Marianne informed, should correspondence become difficult. "Courage. Think of those whose children are dead. I, after all, shall return."⁴⁶

She felt that the other prisoners had forgotten about Ferré and talked too much about Rossel. Rossel really was of a different calibre than Ferré but Louise, the black-and-white revolutionary, was not the one to admit it. "People talk a great deal about Rossel," she wrote, "but before I leave this prison I wish to salute the graves of his two companions, who are forgotten today as they were ignored yesterday." First, Bourgeois, of whom she knew only that he was an orphan and that he had died bravely. "And second, Ferré, my brother in arms." She defended him, one last time. "I shall not speak of his behaviour during the Siege nor as a member of the Commune. I shall not name the officers whose lives he saved on March 18; that time will come. I wish, instead, to give him this message: we are proud of you, and we envy your fate, for you died for the cause of the people."⁴⁷ Yes, some students held a demonstration to protest Rossel's execution, but Ferré, "the

delegate from the popular districts, who repeatedly but anonymously risked his own life, who was correct and calm in everything that he did, who gave his full intelligence and heart to the cause, no, nobody honoured his memory... Such behaviour can mean only that Paris is truly dead." She solemnly charged the Commune sympathizers who had managed to take refuge abroad never to forget "the hangmen of the Commission of Pardons."⁴⁸

And finally, she gave Abbé Folley copies of all the letters she had written since her arrest — the one exonerating the working-class women from any involvement with the Commune, the one about the women's brigade, the ones about the famous "documents" incriminating M. Thiers which she now regretted not having mentioned during her trial — and asked that he forward the entire bundle to lawyers Marchand and Laviolette, who would make appropriate use of them. Perhaps some newspaper would manage to publish them without running undue risk? "I think I am now quite without a heart, yet I must carry out my duties according to my conscience. Now they can do with me as they will; I'll not feel it..."⁴⁹

She had set her teeth and done everything she felt must be done, but now she was in the grips of her misery, tottering on the edge of absolute despair. "He [Ferré] was right to urge me to hold on to my courage. Now, for the first time, I truly feel that I am no longer worthy either of the cause, or of him. To hear seven o'clock strike every morning, to hear two o'clock strike in the dead of each night, to think that they awakened him, with his great intelligence and courage, only to assassinate him...no, it's unbearable. Please do not think me a coward, it's not that. But to live like this is a torture to which I would have already succumbed but for the duty which orders me not to yield."⁵⁰

Then one night, they brusquely led Louise and twenty other women to a waiting police van. Destination: Auberive prison.

VIII - THE GREAT VOYAGE

Height, 1.64 metres; brown hair and eyebrows; high forehead; brown eyes; large nose; average mouth; round chin; oval face; regular complexion — these were the identifying characteristics of convict No. 2182, Louise Michel.¹

Louise was always to remember the former chateau of Auberive, now transformed into a prison, with a sort of surprised delight. I've already said that she had the sensitivity, the raw material and the sheer energy to be a great writer. What she lacked was taste. She wrote as she lived, always a hurried first draft (she said). Even so, there were sometimes flashes of something better: "I can see Auberive now, with its narrow paths winding through the fir trees, the winds sighing through its large dormitories as if through a great ship, the silent files of prisoners with their white caps and pleated kerchiefs caught at their throats, like peasant women of a hundred years ago..."² And the winds of Auberive were the same ones she had felt in the halls of Vroncourt those many years ago.³

After the high drama of the Commune and the tragedy of the councils of war, everything else paled in comparison, seemed "trivial, without significance... I'm not suffering. I'm dead, and that's for the best. Only one sorrow touches me [the defeat of the Commune? more probably Ferré's death]. It is as if I have passed beyond life itself." A phrase from the Mass echoed in her mind: *sursum corda*. "It must surprise you to hear me quote the Mass," she wrote Abbé Folley, "but right

now, these are the appropriate words." She entrusted Marianne to his care: "Tell her that she is more fortunate than many other mothers. Use whatever words you can find." And then, a bit impishly, "She's so good at resigning herself..."⁴

Louise could reveal to Abbé Folley all her inner melancholy and despair, the real self so different from the fierce, implacable *pétroleuse* of public image. For her real self was an unhappy woman who had lost the man she loved and admired (since, with Louise, love and admiration could not be separated). The only thing left to her — she, who bowed to nobody — was to remain worthy of him and obey his last wishes. "No... I shall not betray this trust. But if you knew, at this new year,* how much I live in the past and in the future rather than the present... You know who ordered me to be calm; I obey."⁵ Louise reacted to Abbé Folley's reply as if it had come from Ferré himself: "Yes, I shall obey. I saw in him such superiority of mind and heart that to me, his advice amounted to orders — and I have never obeyed anybody in my entire life."⁶ She could have accepted anything, anything but the execution of November 28! If only she could have died like and with Ferré, joined him in martyrdom for the one cause worthy of such sacrifice: the Revolution. "It is a joy to die for one's convictions, as long as we die together. Otherwise, it is pointless cruelty."⁷ She thought of the past. One year earlier, she had told Ferré that it was noble to have no reward for one's actions but death. "But that was when I hoped to share it with him. It would have made me so happy..."⁸

To obey, therefore, to be calm, to wait patiently. Wait for what? For the great sea voyage she had hoped to make with him. Fortunately, there were always the pinpricks of prison life to distract her... The cells, for example, where she was sent when she refused to join some mandatory group activity or other. From there, you could look out over the countryside.⁹ No news from the outside world, except for visits from the town crier who came to read new governmental orders, proving each time that "Nothing changes in the worst of all possible Republics."¹⁰

Her other distraction, a happier one, was to help the other prisoners. "The awareness of all that remains still to be done is the only thing that keeps me from trying to join those whom I

* written in January 1872 — *transl. note*

have lost.”¹¹

The Auberive detainees included Augustine Chiffon, called “Madame la Capitaine,” who had received a sentence of twenty years’ forced labour for defending the Austerlitz barricade, revolver in hand; Béatrix Excoffon, ambulance nurse and president of the Boule Noire revolutionary club, sentenced to deportation to a fortress; Mme Poirier, president of the women’s Vigilance Committee of the eighteenth arrondissement, also sentenced to deportation; Mme Delettra, an “old woman” of fifty, who had earned her nickname, “Queen of the Barricades,” back in 1848 in Lyon, sentenced to twenty years; Nathalie Lemel, as courageous and intelligent as Louise herself, who had run the Union of Women for the Defence of Paris, sentenced to deportation to a fortress; and the women who had been collectively sentenced to death at the so-called Trial of the *Pétroleuses*, their sentences later commuted to life imprisonment at hard labour — Elizabeth Rétoffe, Joséphine Marchais, Léontine Suétens.¹² And many, many more. Yes, Louise could at least try to help these women. She therefore wrote Victor Hugo, whose generosity and courage had never failed her: “Dear Master, could you win the release of Béatrix [Excoffon]?” The woman had lost first her father, then her mother (from sorrow) and now her brother-in-law had just died.¹³ Louise, together with Abbé Folley, became an intermediary for the other prisoners: three women asked her to take the necessary steps to bring them before the Commission of Pardons.¹⁴ She kept Abbé Folley informed as to the health and morale of the others:¹⁵ Rétoffe and Marchais were full of courage, Suétens and Papavoine were ill. Worse than that: “These poor women are becoming so demoralized that they’re beginning to say the most ridiculous things.” Fortunately, Auberive enjoyed a “good” prison administration, which understood that these women’s past sufferings had been quite enough to account for any present mental instability. “Give them hope,” Louise told the chaplain.

Nonetheless, the prisoners slowly adjusted to their situation, began to work and said they wanted to study. As always, Louise responded to the appeal. “Boredom and trivial thoughts are disappearing.”¹⁶ But how frivolous and gossipy they all were! They even talked about military executions right to Louise’s face, thereby, she said, proving the truth of the old expression about “turning a knife in the wound.”¹⁷

Louise was mindful of the "good sisters" of the Versailles prison and sent them, through Abbé Folley, a spray of holly as a souvenir. "The Gospel today was the story of all martyrdoms: first the entry into Jerusalem, and then Calvary. Only those who die are happy."¹⁸

Paris was full of rumours about Louise's fate, including one which said that she was being held incommunicado, so that some discreet poison might bring about the fate to which they had not dared openly sentence her.¹⁹ Three women called on Victor Hugo, asking him to try to have her sentence commuted to one of simple banishment. He wrote in his *Carnets*,²⁰ "I shall do what I can," but Louise countermanded these efforts: "I want nothing in my sentence altered. I have the right to demand that it be left unchanged." Her only wish was to see her mother still alive upon her return; her only duty, "to remain worthy of those who died, and of our objective. The future will be our judge."²¹ She learned that Captain Briot himself, in a spirit of "irresponsible benevolence," had made approaches on her behalf to the Commission of Pardons. She was appalled. Abbé Folley must convince this over-zealous, guilt-stricken captain that she would rather die than be "degraded."²² Would all these friends, trying so hard to intercede on her behalf, please leave her in peace! All she wanted was the calm oblivion of prison: "even semi-liberty would disturb me."²³

And under all these surface events ran the steady current of her despair, breaking out from time to time in the cry: "I shrink from daylight, from summer, from all that is alive."²⁴

As usual, Louise's great sprawling handwriting blackened many sheets of paper with new poetry. One lovely example was the poem she wrote on November 28, 1872, in commemoration of Ferré's death. (It is, perhaps, more accurate to say that the poem contained a few lovely lines.) Here Louise is at her best, her tenderness openly revealed:

*Soufflez, O vents d'hiver, tombe toujours, O neige,
On est plus près des morts sous tes linceuls glacés.
Qu la nuit soit sans fin et que le jour s'abrège,
On compte par hiver chez les froids trépassés...*

But then she dries her eyes and looks bravely (if somewhat tritely) to the future and to eternal renewal:

*Pareil au grain qui devient gerbe
Sur le sol arrosé de sang*

L'avenir grandira superbe
*Sous le rouge soleil levant...*²⁵

Publishers besieged her, clamouring with equal degrees of excitement for new material or works to reissue. Louise had previously published nothing more than some poetry, some articles and the preface to her *Plus d'idiots, plus de fous*. Her manuscripts were widely scattered. And she was well aware that on the pretext of helping Marianne, they intended to hold "an orgy of maudlin sentimentality" at her expense. She refused to co-operate with any such "contemptible" plan.²⁶ "They think I'll tamely write them some pretty little tales that preach a high moral lesson at the end." She'd never do that but, if it would earn some money for her mother, she'd gladly write some history and geography textbooks.²⁷ She had begun work in April²⁸ on a collection of children's stories, *La Livre du jour de l'an*, a good vehicle for all her favourite themes: Brittany, whose primitive inhabitants were still men of faith; human suffering throughout the ages; legends, which she cross-referenced from one country to another (an Iroquois tale brought to mind a German one); the need for goodness (e.g. *Les Dix Sous de Marthe*, *L'Héritage du Grand-père Blaise*); and the other side of the coin as well, ogres, both male (Gilles de Retz and the Baron des Adrets) and female (Béatrix de Mauléon).

She received a visit from her mother and some of her cousins. This gave her renewed will to work, since "It seems this could be of some help to *maman*." Still, she was dubious: "I don't want to give idiot friends any fresh stimulus to rush off begging favours on my behalf. Anyway, you can keep a watchful eye on it all," she wrote Abbé Folley.²⁹

Le Rappel announced the publication of the convict's stories.³⁰ *La République française* gave "this book of goodness and justice" a highly favourable review: "Even under lock and key, Louise Michel is the eternal schoolteacher. She wishes to teach children to be responsible adults, and the gaiety, sanity and joy of her approach is unchanged. She says, 'Children, you are the future. Be just. That is everything.'"³¹

Victor de Thiery, however, wrote a furiously indignant review for *Le Pays*. "This creature deserves neither attention nor pity. Oh, the poor little communards of the future! As for the anonymous author of that soppy review in *La République française*, it's a safe bet that if he had any children, he'd keep Louise Michel's books safely out of reach."³² It's obvious that

Victor de Thierry hadn't read the thoroughly moralistic tales in question — though one must add, Louise's code of justice and morality did proceed from a critique of society not usually to be found in children's books. *Pauvre Blaise*, for example, was a tale designed to stir the first flickerings of social revolt...

Meanwhile, prison life followed its same monotonous rhythm. Louise kept writing: *La Femme à travers les âges* (later published in a newspaper), *L'Excommunié*, *La Conscience*, *Le Livre des morts*, the first part of *Livre du Bagne*.³³ All these efforts have disappeared without a trace, but what remains is more than enough. There's far too much bad writing in print as it is!

Louise was as belligerent as ever, even after two years in prison. She did write to the Commission of Pardons, but only to threaten them: "Bravo, gentlemen executors of noble deeds, your role is a vital one. Once you have finished your work, no shred of doubt will remain as to any possible wisdom and morality in your party. The Empire left a small margin of infamy as yet uncommitted, but you commit it now. You have made France the shame of the entire world; socialism will rise from these ruins to save her."³⁴

She complained as well to M. Massé, police superintendent, about the police spies and *agents provocateurs* who were passing themselves off to her as journalists.³⁵

For they had to keep a close watch on Louise, even in prison. Her conduct before the Council of War, after all, had made her a symbol of revolutionary resistance. A pamphlet printed in La Chaux-de-Fonds began to circulate, entitled, *Un Mot sur les tribunaux politiques, condamnation de Louise Michel*. The ministry of the Interior was sufficiently worried to order all departmental prefects to suppress it immediately.³⁶

Months passed. Occasionally Marianne would make the long, expensive trip from Clefmont (where she was living with her sister) to visit her daughter. She wrote Louise touching, naive and baffled letters. It wasn't easy to be Louise Michel's mother: "The pain I have known has broken me." She talked of the life they might have led together and the joy it would have given her: "I feel such misery when I think that we could have lived together and been happy while you taught your classes. Yet here we are instead, separated from each other." She sent Louise a branch from the tree above her grandfather's grave and a flower from that of her grandmother.³⁷ The old woman

complained. Her kidneys bothered her. She was unable to work the bit of land still remaining to her: "The vineyards depress me, so I don't visit them anymore."³⁸ She would have liked to send Louise a bit of money with which to buy herself strong coffee (Louise's great addiction), but she had none. "You were so touchy when I mentioned the coffee. I'm not reproaching you but the fact is, I have no money, and it bothers me."

She sent Louise a bowl which had belonged to an aunt. And the underlying reproaches bore the mark of peasant respectability: "I never dreamed I'd see the insides of a reformatory, especially on your behalf."³⁹ Still, whenever she had a little money, Marianne sent some of it to Louise: four francs one time, two francs another, nine francs...

Louise in return sent her the bits of needlecraft she was doing in prison: a pincushion for her aunt, a collar for her mother.⁴⁰ She fussed about winter clothing and Marianne replied: "Don't worry about what I'm going to wear this winter. I don't need your coat. Keep it."⁴¹ The old lady visited Vroncourt, searched everywhere for a souvenir flower from the former gardens but found none, not even in the kitchen garden: "They've ploughed everything under."⁴²

Marianne's greatest sorrow was Louise's lack of faith, for she had no understanding whatsoever of her daughter's personal evolution. "Put your trust in God... Only God can protect you... Don't forget to let me know when you're about to set out on your trip. Your aunt and I will put you under the protection of the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph."⁴³ She sent Louise a lock of her hair, now turned pure white, and the implicit reproach was clear: "It's not the years I have spent on this earth that have done this, it's the torment I have known in these last three years on your behalf."⁴⁴

Just as François Villon's mother had done before her, this "humble Christian" tried ceaselessly to bring Louise to docility and faith. "You are forever asking what would give me pleasure. Only one thing would give me great pleasure, and that would be to see you a little more submissive... When you were a child, you haunted the church, now you don't even attend Mass... Yet now you have the time, and it would please me so much."⁴⁵

Louise heard from other members of her family as well, including her devoted cousin, Marie Laurent, who wrote: "I shall tear aside the veil of mourning that shrouds my heart to

love you as no-one has ever loved before." She called Louise her "beloved cousin," her "dear sister."⁴⁶ Even within her own family, Louise aroused respect and fervent love.

By now the departure for New Caledonia seemed imminent. Marianne, despite the fatigue which the trip to Auberive always caused her, announced that she wished to come once more: "I'm so afraid that if I wait, it will be like Versailles and I'll not see you at all." Aunt Victoire embraced her (by mail). Cousin Marie Laurent sent some more emotion-charged pages.⁴⁷ Marianne fretted: "Above all, I beg you to take care of yourself during this trip, so that we may meet again. For my part, I'm no longer young and I have seen many years go by, the latest ones being especially sorrowful for me..."⁴⁸

Despite their quarrels, Louise really did love her mother very much and therefore arranged with the ever-patient Abbé Folley to tell Marianne as many reassuring white lies as circumstances seemed to require: during the sea trip, for example, he was to give her mother continuing progress reports, just as if he really were in touch with Louise.⁴⁹

Deep down, Louise was thrilled with the idea of this trip. It would be risky, but she loved adventure, and it was sure to be rich in experience. She prepared for it just as if the whole thing had been her own idea, rather than imposed upon her. She contacted the Geographic Society and arranged to send back her observations on the climate and products of this still little-known region.⁵⁰ The chairman of the Acclimatization Society furnished her with seeds which she thought might be useful in the colony. He also supplied her requested list of books, and the titles demonstrate the breadth of her linguistic curiosity, for they ranged from a grammar and a dictionary of the Breton language, to a variety of Russian and Polish textbooks.⁵¹ I doubt very many other deportees ever set off as did Louise Michel, determined to transform punishment into a scientific expedition.

Just before her departure, Louise bestowed one last vengeful farewell on that "old world" she was leaving behind. They had insisted she continue to live, so be it:

Vous me verrez de rive en rive

Jeter le cri de Liberté...

She and her fellows would forget nothing:

Nous sommes les grands justiciers,

Nous sommes les spectres funèbres...

Nous sommes la horde innombrable...

Some day, the Revolution would blow "like the wind through the fields." And then the judges, the high and mighty, the victors,

*Vous irez où s'en va l'écume,
Où va la fange du ruisseau,
Où s'en va la lave qui fume...⁵²*

The corridors of power were now alive with their own preparations for the great departure. The Superior-General of the Congregation of Saint Joseph of Cluny put two nuns at the disposal of the minister of the Navy and the Colonies, who were to accompany the deportees to New Caledonia.⁵³

The prisoners were allowed one final family visit on the eve of their departure. Louise saw that her mother's hair was indeed pure white.⁵⁴ Marianne still had two brothers and two sisters alive, and the sister in Lagny was financially able to take her in. Louise was very much reassured: "I have no cause for complaint." Many others were not so fortunate.⁵⁵

The women left the prison by carriage between six and seven o'clock the following morning. Their first stop was Langres, where they were transferred to police vans. Some grimy-armed workers, probably blacksmiths, came out of their shops to greet the women. One grizzled old man shouted something, perhaps "Long live the Commune!" but his words were lost in the galloping hooves of the departing horses. That night, as they slept in their vans, they crossed Paris, from Gare de l'Est to Gare d'Austerlitz.⁵⁶

The second stop was a way-house in La Rochelle. The authorities' paperwork for the voyage included a list of the prisoners' occupations. There they were, all lined up: journalist Marie Cailleux, seamstress Adèle Desfossés, bookbinder Nathalie Lemel, wardrobe-mistress Marie Pervillé, Marie Leroy (of no profession)... This list of washerwomen, seamstresses, wardrobe-mistresses, a teacher, a bookbinder, even a "registered prostitute," formed an accurate social profile of the women of the Commune. The authorities also took note of their personal finances: 90 francs, 112 francs, 130 francs... Louise Michel, with 2 fr. 50 in her pocket, was the poorest of them all.⁵⁷

On August 28, 1873, *La Comète* carried them from La Rochelle to Rochefort:

On lève l'ancre, France, adieu.

wrote Louise in a state of high emotion, at three that morning.

All that day, little boats accompanied the ship, *La Virginie*, and its cargo of deportees, offering them one last salute. The women waved their handkerchiefs in reply. When hers blew away in the wind, Louise waved her widow's veil instead.⁵⁹

This was the beginning of the great voyage which she had so long anticipated, which even her verses from Audeloncourt days had somehow foreseen. She *recognized* the ship: "I have spoken...of the kinds of circumstances which set tellers of strange tales, like Edgar Allan Poe and Baudelaire, to dreaming. I shall say little on my own account: perhaps this brief mention of *La Virginie* in full sail, just as I had already seen her in my dreams, will be the only page I write of this sort."⁶⁰ And indeed, Louise never again mentioned the kinds of presentiments she had experienced that night in the Montmartre cemetery and later described to Ferré. She may have been an anarchist revolutionary, a materialist and an atheist, but even so, she had a kind of communication with the invisible worthy of the prophets of any religion.

La Virginie was an old sailing frigate, built in 1848. She had been hauled out of mothballs expressly for this trip, and the authorities had had the greatest of difficulty in finding any captain willing to command her. The ship contained two huge cages, one each for the male and female deportees.⁶¹ Communication was officially forbidden between the cages, but the rule was freely ignored.

"Good morning, comrade," called Louise Michel one morning to Rochefort. "Good morning, comrade," he replied. She pulled a calico dress and bonnet from her bag and said, "Look what lovely wedding presents Mac-Mahon^{*62} has sent me." That was the start of a thirty-year friendship.

Whatever the special circumstances of this voyage, Louise — who had never even been to the seashore — was wildly enthusiastic about it all. She drank in every detail: "We could still see the coast of France for five or six days and then, nothing. On about the fourteenth day, most of the huge ocean birds disappeared, though two continued to follow us for a while

* Marshal M.-E.-P.-M. Mac-Mahon, Duc de Magenta: commander of the Versailles troops that crushed the Commune and, by the time Louise set sail for New Caledonia, president of the Republic — *transl. note*

longer..."⁶³ Then swallows reappeared on their masts: they were nearing the Canary Islands. The very thought enchanted her. "Far in the distance, a peak floating in the clouds. Is it Mount Caldera or just another formation of the clouds themselves?" She noted the grace and beauty of the Canary Islanders who came out to the ship bearing fruit. Her imagination took flight (as usual): perhaps these were the descendants of long-lost Atlantis? She wrote, like some latter-day Chateaubriand: "I have often thought of the continents which lie buried beneath the oceans. Should they rise from their beds, they would engulf us, thus deserting one tomb only to create another." *This* Chateaubriand, however, had faith in the future: "But it wouldn't stop eternal progress," she quickly added.⁶⁴

The high seas were a constant delight to this woman who had previously known only the Haute-Marne, Paris and a succession of prisons. "All my life I had dreamed of sailing the broad oceans and now there I was, balanced between the skies and the seas as between two deserts, with nothing to break the silence but wind and rolling waves."⁶⁵ They put in at Santa Catarina in Brazil, its fortress and mountain peaks lost in clouds. And then they crossed the South Atlantic Ocean, where "snow falls on the bridge in the dead of night."

Her passion for the sky and the sea appeared in her poetry:

*La neige tombe, le flot roule,
L'air est glacé, le ciel est noir,
Le vaisseau craque sous la houle
Et le matin se mêle au soir...*

The sailors, who were Breton, danced about on the decks to keep warm:

*Ils disent au pôle glacé
Un air des landes de Bretagne,
Un vieux bardit du temps passé,*

and their song brought tears to the eye:

*Cet air est-il un chant magique?...
Non, c'est un souffle d'Armorique
Tout rempli de genêts en fleur...*

But Louise's thoughts always turned from the past to the future:

*Et c'est le vent des mers polaires,
Tonnant dans ses trompes d'airain
Les nouveaux bardits populaires*

*De la légende de demain.*⁶⁶

Whenever the wind howled at tempest force, whenever the waves towered and crashed, whenever *La Virginie* tossed and strained... Louise set loose her emotions to join the storm:

*L'aspect de ces gouffres enivre,
Plus haut, O flots, plus fort, O vents.
Il devient trop cher de vivre
Tant ici les songes sont grands.*

What she wanted to do was disappear, lose herself "in the crucible of the elements." She urged the storm to redouble its fury:

*Enflez les voiles, O tempêtes,
Plus haut, O flots, plus fort, O vents
Navire, en avant, en avant...*⁶⁷

She passed these poems to Rochefort who — "a sad Paul for this Virginia" as he wryly put it — was tormented by seasickness: "I don't know why Vasco da Gama ever struggled to find this miserable route." The poem he in turn addressed to his "lady neighbour of the rear starboard side" was in quite a different tone. Thank you very much, he could do without the sea and the wind. Then his talent for biting satire came to the fore:

*Avant d'entrer au gouffre amer,
Avions-nous moins le mal de mer?*

When they met icebergs:

*Je songe alors à nos vainqueurs,
Quand nous nous heurtions à des coeurs
Cent fois plus durs que des banquises.*

And:

*Ce phoque entrevu ce matin
M'a rappelé dans le lointain,
Le chauve Rouher aux mains grasses,
Et ces requins qu'on a pêchés
De la Commission des Grâces.*

And as for the law, "Misery to the vanquished":

*N'en étions-nous pas convaincus
Avant d'aller aux antipodes...*⁶⁸

And so the two prisoners amused each other.

Even in this extreme poverty, Louise still managed to give things away. Her "lovely wedding present" from Mac-Mahon had gone immediately. She walked the bridge in temperatures of 5 degrees Celsius with nothing on her feet but a pair of canvas

espadrilles. Captain Launay, who was a decent man, wanted to give her a pair of shoes. Knowing that Louise would never take them from him, he asked Rochefort to pass them on: "You must make her think they come from you." Rochefort sent Louise a little note, explaining that his daughter had given him these shoes just before they set sail but, alas, they were too small for him. "For two days, I had the pleasure of seeing them on her feet. By the third day, they were on someone else's feet. In this world, possessing nothing is no sure defence against exploitation," he concluded with his habitual illusion-free irony.⁶⁹

Louise's charity extended to animals, as it always had. The "cruellest thing" she saw on *La Virginie* was not the deportees in their cages but rather, the massacre of the albatross. The birds were caught on fish-hooks and then suspended by their feet "so that they would die without soiling their white feathers. For the longest, most pitiful time, they would keep lifting their heads, stretching their swan-like necks as far as possible, prolonging the terrible agony which we could read in the horror that filled their black-lashed eyes."⁷⁰ Louise, quite ignoring the fact that she, too, was a prisoner, did everything she could to halt this cruel practice.

She also used the lengthy voyage to think about the events of the Commune and the reasons for its defeat. She talked it all over with Nathalie Lemel, Nathalie being the only woman of the group who could be considered Louise's equal. "A remarkable intelligence, a clear and wise spirit," wrote Henry Bauer in his *Mémoires d'un jeune homme*.⁷¹ Rochefort concurred: "One of the loveliest and most intelligent women I have ever known. Her eloquence and good sense merit great praise."⁷²

Nathalie Lemel, née Duval, was only three years older than Louise but appeared older still and "wearied by life."⁷³ Born on August 26, 1827 in Brest, the daughter of wealthy cafe proprietors, she had received a good education for the times and then married a bookbinder. For a while they ran a bookstore in Quimper and, when it went bankrupt, moved on to Paris, where they soon separated. Nathalie, though intelligent, was "highly exalted" — that adjective being used regularly by the police and the magistracy for people who held and lived by strong political convictions. Nathalie was forever calling attention to herself in the various bookbinding shops where she worked

because she used to read aloud from "bad" newspapers. She became affiliated with the International and, together with Varlin, founded a food co-operative named *La Marmite*, whose objective was to provide workers with food at a reasonable price. This co-op, however, like many other popular co-ops, had a political goal as well and soon became part of a federation of food and production co-operatives. This boded ill, as far as the authorities were concerned: success in this sort of venture would mean the complete transformation of capitalist society.

Nathalie had been involved with the revolutionary clubs as well and, together with Elizabeth Dmitrieff, ran the Union of Women for the Defence of Paris and Aid to the Wounded. She fought on the barricades in both Les Batignolles and Place Pigalle and when the Commune fell, tried to commit suicide. Her matter-of-fact recital of all these activities to the Council of War won her the sentence of banishment to a fortress. Like Louise, Nathalie had refused to appeal her sentence; again like Louise, she had accepted full responsibility for all her deeds. The two women had equally fine character and equal amounts of determination but, when it came to common sense, Nathalie was well ahead of Louise.⁷⁴

And so the women — whenever Nathalie wasn't writhing with seasickness — talked about the significance of the life and death of the Commune, and these conversations led Louise to an anarchist position. "I considered the things, events and people of the past. I thought about the behaviour of our friends of the Commune: they were so scrupulous, so afraid of exceeding their authority, that they never threw their full energies into anything but the loss of their own lives. I quickly came to the conclusion that good men in power are incompetent, just as bad men are evil, and therefore it is impossible for liberty ever to be associated with any form of power whatsoever." The dream of the Revolution seizing power was nothing but a chimera, a mirage, a delusion: the old institutions seemed to disappear but, in fact, under the guise of some new labels, remained firmly in place. (An excellent prophecy, when one thinks how Bolshevism borrowed from Czarism its entire bureaucracy, police and prison systems, albeit changing the outward symbols and refining the inner workings.) Louise reached the conclusion that any man who takes power soon comes to believe that "L'Etat c'est moi" and so looks upon the State "as a dog does his bone, something to

gnaw and to keep for himself." What, then, was the answer? Here Louise invoked the laws of attraction, so dear to old Fourier: "Those laws of attraction which endlessly spin the numberless spheres toward new suns...must also guide the destiny of human beings..."⁷⁵

Power corrupts: Nathalie and Louise were in complete agreement. Men who hold power will inevitably do one of two things: become criminals, "if they are weak or selfish," or be destroyed, "if they are devoted and hard-working." Nathalie agreed with Louise's dictum and Louise noted, "Since I have a great deal of confidence in her integrity, her approval gives me great pleasure."⁷⁶

Finally, on December 10, 1873, after four months of voyage, the shores of New Caledonia came into view. Louise had managed to learn a great deal on the trip. This ability to extract the maximum benefit from every experience, however devastating it might initially appear to be, is a rare talent.

IX - NEW CALEDONIA

New Caledonia lies 1400 kilometres east of Australia between 20° and 23° latitude and 164° and 167° longitude; it is 400 kilometres long by 40 to 50 kilometres wide, with two mountain peaks, Mt. Panié (1650 metres) and Mt. Humboldt (1634 metres), a river (the Diahot), shores rimmed by coral reefs, and a healthy and temperate climate. This, according to the dictionaries, was the distant island to which the French penal authorities, from 1863 to 1896, sent all those sentenced to more than eight years' hard labour.

La Virginie drew near with all the easy grace of a sailing ship, and Louise turned delighted eyes on Noumea harbour. She saw seven smudgy blue hills under an intensely blue sky and beyond them all, Mont d'Or, "with seams of gold running like stripes through its red earth." And everywhere, arid mountains "cut by deep gorges, dramatic evidence of recent cataclysm."¹

Sure enough, the moment they landed, the two "ringleaders,"* Louise and Nathalie, became embroiled in a dispute with the governor, Gauthier de la Richerie. The governor, who was really quite a decent man, had prepared accommodation for the women on the open plain at Bourail which was much more comfortable than that reserved for the men on Ducos Peninsula. And, who knows, he might have thought it just as well to segregate the sexes... Whatever his thoughts, Nathalie spat at him: "We neither seek nor accept favouritism of any kind. We

* I attach no negative connotations to the word! — *author's note*

shall live with our fellow deportees in the fortress, as set out by law." To which the governor replied, "Since I have chosen to intern you elsewhere, you have no choice but to obey." Nathalie answered, "This is how we shall obey: unless we are today reunited with our friends on the peninsula, Louise and I, this same evening at precisely eight o'clock, will throw ourselves into the sea." The surprised governor could only bow and say, gallantly, "Enough, ladies. You shall go to Ducos Peninsula."²

In fact, the distant French authorities had made a mistake when they assigned the deportees to the peninsula. The governor himself had suggested Ducos *Island*, a barren rock of slow death. But on the map, one "Ducos" looked much like another and so, for once, bureaucratic stupidity and inattention had a benevolent effect. It meant, paradoxically, that the simple deportees on Pine Island had a much harder time of it than those given the harsher sentence of banishment to a fortress.³

Louise Michel immediately found herself among old acquaintances. There was old Malezieux, whose tunic had been shredded by gunshot on January 22, 1871; Lacour, the one who had been so angry with Louise when she imitated the sound of the shellfire on the organ in the little Protestant church in Neuilly; more comrades from La Corderie du Temple, from the Vigilance Committee of the eighteenth arrondissement, old comrades with whom she had marched a long way. Others, though, had perished before she arrived — the schoolteacher Verdure, for example, who had been so interested in new educational ideas, had died of heartbreak over the lack of news from his family, for on New Caledonia six to eight months would pass between a letter and its reply. The new arrivals strolled about Ducos Peninsula for a few days "as if they were on an outing."⁴ Grousset and Pain threw a special dinner to welcome the deportees, Rochefort in particular, and there they met a Melanesian* named Daoumi. Each deportee had built himself a hut as best he could, and worked his own bit of land with "stone-age" tools.⁵ A prison had been established in the military camp for the men, in case of misbehaviour, but there was no prison for the women. The innermost circle of this

* today the term is "Melanesian"; when Louise went to New Caledonia the white inhabitants were still calling all non-whites by the sweeping term, "Kanaka"
— *transl. note*

south-seas Hell was the horror of Nou Island, reserved for all those prisoners (political and non-political alike) who had been sentenced to "double chains." There they dragged their shackles, day in, day out.⁶

Louise was immediately struck by the beauty of the island. She immersed herself in its details: the forest with its liana plants trailing their white and yellow flowers; the bewildering profusion of leaves, "shaped like arrows, lances, vine leaves and clover"; the bushes covered in tiny white flowerets. She saw few red flowers and only one blue. Then there was the variety of fruit: figs, "with their ashy smell"; bitter cashew trees; huge mulberries covered as if with a layer of white sugar; yellow plums. People said these fruit were inedible, but Louise found she liked them better than European fruit and gathered them along the lava paths between the rocks. And, most wonderfully of all, the "niaouli"* trees, "their branches weeping beneath the huge full moon, raised like the arms of sobbing giants over the docile native earth."

Louise also revelled in the insect life (she really did have a touch of St. Francis of Assisi about her). "There's nothing nicer than the tumbling grey snowfall of grasshoppers" or the "bugs," which are "absolute gems, precious little rubies and emeralds." The island was a spider's paradise: why didn't Europe exploit the silk spiders? She reported few birds, but saw some handsome snakes and little flying-foxes which "hung by their toes and stared at you with black-button eyes."⁷

She was a passionate, primitive woman herself, and she felt at home in this lush countryside, with the crash of the sea resounding in her ears as she walked the endless stretches of deserted beach. She felt even more at home whenever a cyclone blew in; then, she was transfixed. "Sometimes a gigantic red flash rips the inky sky, or lights a single purple gleam on which float the black waves like a length of funeral crêpe. Thunder, crashing waves, the alarm gun booming in the harbour, rain beating down in torrents, great gusts of wind, it all comes together in one huge, magnificent noise: the great orchestra of nature herself."⁸

None of the other Commune deportees were poets. No-one

* in French, "niaoulis," a word coined on the island in 1878 and rendered in English as "nialouli" or "cajeput" tree; belonging to the family *Melaleuca leucadendron* — transl. note

else has left us such a description of New Caledonian nature, such a feeling of pantheistic communion.

But it was more than Louise's sense of harmony with land, sea and wind that distinguished her from her comrades. She also reacted very differently to the Arab deportees and the indigenous Melanesians. Most of the deported Communards showed themselves to be pompous, fat-headed white racists. Louise, however, admired the Algerian deportees and identified their revolt with the Communards' own: "These Orientals, imprisoned so far from their tents and flocks, were simple and good people, with a strong sense of justice." Indeed, one of them, El Mokrani, became such a good friend that upon his release from New Caledonia, he tried to make contact with Louise again back in Paris. Louise, however, true to her destiny, was at that moment in prison.⁹

And then there was the indigenous population, who were so strange and so wretched that the deportees despised them just as much as did the French island authorities and the free colonists. But Louise loved them, and she tried hard to understand these people who were so different from any that she had ever known. I have no idea what the ethnographers of today would make of her research. I value it, though, even if its efforts to communicate with another people across language, race and ritual would today have no "scientific" importance whatsoever.

She had met the Melanesian Daoumi immediately upon her arrival, when he too was a guest at a meal offered in honour of the newly-arrived deportees. He had sung a song that day, and Louise was fascinated by its strange sounds and its use of quarter-tones.¹⁰ She even tried to translate its words:

Très beau, très bon

Rouge ciel

Rouge hache

Rouge feu

Rouge sang

Salut Adieu

Hommes braves...

Daoumi had managed to get himself a job at the deportees' canteen and there he learned to read and write. It was he who taught Louise his tribal language, taught her its songs (which she wrote down), told her its legends:¹¹ "You have the Edda and the other Sagas, the Romancero, the Nibelungenlied; we

have our black bards, who sing the songs of the age of stone." Long before Frazer,* Louise tried to unite different mythologies: Kéidée la Takata, for example, made her think of Faust. She thought cannibalism could be accounted for "by hunger and anger" (a pretty simplistic explanation). She listened to the talk of auguries, of charms, of voodoo and she remembered the tales told in peasants' huts back in Vroncourt. Daoumi also told her of the shock caused by the white man's arrival: "They arrived in huge barques and they cut down our trees to fasten their sails to their boats. That was all right. They ate the yam. That was all right. But then they took the land, and the women, and the young people... They must have been very unhappy in their own land, to have come so far."¹²

She started compiling a glossary of the most common words in the different tribal languages. She studied their elementary numbering system, and she mused, "I may be fooling myself, but I think science should be able to do without vocabulary and numeration, it should study the remaining examples of the stone age, for in this way we could learn something of the past..."¹³ And so Louise anticipated the science of ethnography. Her research might make Lévi-Strauss and the other structuralists smile, but she was nonetheless an early pioneer in a brand-new field.

She also blazed a trail in music. She had always been fascinated by strange sounds and had even dreamed up a sort of piano in which the keys were replaced by bow-like structures.¹⁴ The deportees had set up a theatre for themselves, complete with directors, actors, stage hands and props, where they regularly put on dramas, vaudeville routines and operettas. Louise tried to persuade them to mount another kind of spectacle entirely: in the one she and Daoumi had in mind, the performers would be shaking palm branches, clapping bamboos, sounding horn-shaped shells and vibrating leaves with their lips. The Communard deportees, however, were accustomed to the theatres of the Second Empire and therefore appalled at all this "savagery." Henry Bauer, who was then busy preparing a study of Othello, asked her, "You *really* want to put on a Kanaka play?" The resulting quarrel was so violent that people nearby thought a full-scale riot had broken out.¹⁵

* Sir James George Frazer, author of "The Golden Bough," which argued the existence of a universal primitive religion — *transl. note*

First in Vroncourt, then Paris, now New Caledonia: Louise always used her verses to express her sorrow, joy, anger and her own strange nature.

Sur les Niaoulis

*Les Niaoulis aux troncs blancs
Se tordent sur les hautes herbes...
Sur les niaoulis gémissent les cyclones
Sonnez, O vents des mers, vos trompes monotones...
Il faut que l'aurore se lève:
Chaque nuit recèle un matin
Pour qui la veille n'est qu'un rêve...¹⁶*

And the sea, always the sea. This woman who had never known anything but land found its incessant noise gave her the measure of eternity:

*Avec les vagues, sous la houle,
Les temps présents, les temps passés
Se mêlent...*

and evoked the unity of all nature:

*Tout ce qui vit sur la terre
Et tout ce qui dort sous les eaux...¹⁷*

She described scenes which the films of Jacques Cousteau have since made familiar to us:

*Au fond lointain des mers sont les forêts mouvantes.
Des poissons ont leurs nids ainsi que des oiseaux...
Et la méduse bleue et le poulpe blanchâtre
Errent à travers les rameaux.¹⁸*

She watched the sun going down over waves, forest and bush:

*On dirait que la terre
Redevient un soleil ardent...*

And then, abruptly, it disappeared. The moon

Met des astres dans les eaux.¹⁹

She wandered the sandy beaches by night, and the smell of the nialouli reminded her of the golden dust of the hazel trees with their hovering clouds of bees.²⁰

But, if everything becomes one in eternity, it means everything is simultaneously both death and rebirth. In her poem *Le Naufrage*, she asked:

*Est-ce le continent qui sombre
Ou le navire qui périt?*

But it didn't matter, since:

*Sous les courants profonds de l'onde
Les tombes germent en berceau.*²¹

Her imagination painted a gigantic Darwinian fresco, with primitive cataclysms slowly subsiding, followed by the first budding plants, then the monsters who spread across the earth and then, the human races who would live and die in turn. But before the planet itself died, man would have transformed it.²²

Un jour pour son oeuvre géante

L'hon.me prendra ta force ardente,

*Nature, dans la grande nuit...*²³

She foresaw that the American continent would be breached (the Panama Canal was not begun until 1881) and then,

Bien plus vite, on ira par des routes nouvelles

*Navires sous-marins et navires des airs...*²⁴

There is a story to the effect that it was Louise Michel who dreamed up the Nautilus...and then sold the idea to Jules Verne for 100 francs. Whether she did or not, she was quite capable of it.²⁵

She kept up the old traditions of the Vroncourt chateau, where every birthday was celebrated in verse. She therefore wrote a poem for the infant son of Henri Place and Marie Cailleux (the mother had been deported for the crime of firing a weapon from a barricade):

Enfant, tu nais dans l'exil sombre

Mais tu verras la liberté

Sur vous ne sera plus notre ombre

*Votre siècle sera clarté...*²⁶

For Louise Michel had forgotten nothing and renounced nothing. The Caledonian landscape inspired and calmed her, but it did not erase the past: it could not blot out the memory of the bloody week in May, or of Ferré's death. On the anniversary of March 18, in 1877, she paced the shore of the Western harbour and cried to the winds for vengeance:

Souvenez-vous, tyrans, de tous vos crimes.

...Souvenez-vous des noires félonies.

...Le 18 mars, c'est le glas du vieux monde.

Déjà vos fronts sont marqués par la mort.

*...Pourtant le temps viendra de la justice entière...*²⁷

But poetry was not enough. She learned of Bazaine's escape* and promptly wrote her old correspondents, the

* Marshal François-Achille Bazaine, the army commander who surrendered at Metz during the Franco-Prussian War, was court-martialled and banished to

Commission of Pardons. Her letter was "in memory of the assassinations committed on November 28, 1871, at 7 a.m.," in memory of Ferré. She wrote: "On January 28, 1874, I told you only one thing remained to be done in order to hasten the fall of this government. Now it has been done. It would appear that M. the Marshal Mac-Mahon, Duc de Magenta, president of what is known as the French republic, has felt there was only one adequate way to make up for the loss of an army of 300,000 men and the surrender to the enemy of our weapons, flags and honour. Accordingly, he arranged for a governor to be posted to the island of Sainte-Marguerite who would be sure to facilitate the escape of M. the Marshal Bazaine." But it was a foolish way to buy silence: "When the traitors finally stand before the Councils of War in their turn and the army, horrified, learns by whose orders (and for what reasons) they were turned into such butchers of men, I truly believe that you will no longer be the Commission of Pardons. Good-bye, gentlemen. But not for long."²⁸

Louise managed to keep in touch with what was happening in Paris, even though at least six months passed between a letter and its reply. She wrote regularly to her friends and they replied just as regularly. She asked Marie Ferré to send her books and specialized texts on sight-singing methods.²⁹ Her cousin Marie Laurent (who had sent her such emotional letters in Auberive), together with another cousin, Galès, sent her a 12-kilo trunk, full of papers and books.³⁰ Georges Clemenceau sent her money orders.³¹ Verlaine's father-in-law, M. de Fleurville (the Montmartre schoolteacher who had so bravely written the Council of War on Louise's behalf), kept her posted on "new discoveries" and managed her affairs in her absence. Louise's "affairs," unfortunately, were inevitably debts. M. de Fleurville had published, at his own expense, the book of children's stories which Louise had written in Auberive.³² In order to pay Louise's debts, however, old Marianne had to sell off the meadow and vineyard which had been her last bit of property.³³

And then there was Hugo, who had recently lost his second son. She wrote: "You walk in death with your sons; there I walk also, with the best and bravest of my brothers."³⁴ He was still her "Master," and she would like to receive a copy of *Les*

* Ile Sainte-Merguéríte, from which he later escaped — *transl. note*

Châtiments: "How I would enjoy rereading it in this desert."³⁵ And again, "Write to me, dear Master, and do not think me too unhappy... Even prior to death, individuality ceases to exist."³⁶ She asked him to write a poem for old Passedouet, for only poetry could pierce such mad nothingness. Poor Passedouet was now the ghost of the man he had once been, rocking himself through his final days with a one-word chant: "Proudhon, Proudhon."³⁷ Louise, having nothing else to give, sent Hugo a piece of coral for a paperweight³⁸ and two verses from her *Océaniennes*, which she had written for him:

Il est un noir rocher près des flots monotones.

*Là j'ai gravé ton nom pour les bruyants cyclones...*³⁹

She also told him that, if they gave her permission, she wanted to go and live with a Melanesian tribe for a while, somewhere "where our influence has not yet been felt... Will they let me do it? I don't know. But I *do* know that I shan't return to France without carrying out this project, because it's stupid to travel six thousand leagues and then not see anything or be of use to anybody."⁴⁰

To be of use: her constant preoccupation. She went on studying the customs and languages of the tribal people, and she began teaching them to read.

She now began carrying out some experiments — after all, she had left France with commissions from geographical and climatological societies and she wanted to get on with the promised work. But her experiments upset the other deportees and infuriated the authorities. She pulled down an empty hut to make herself a plant conservatory. Empty or not, however, it had been *government property*...! Still, the governor gave her permission to carry out experiments on some papaya trees. Louise vaccinated them, thus putting into practice her belief that an analogy can be made between all living things. Whether by sheer accident or not, "my four papayas, which had been very badly yellowed, have now rejuvenated themselves. They were the only ones not to die this year."⁴¹ She had contacts in Paris send her some silkworm cocoons, since she wanted to see if they would adapt to New Caledonia. Unfortunately, the sea-voyage was so long that they were all dead on arrival.⁴²

And that wasn't all. As in prison, so in deportation: Louise was both an example and a symbol to the others. Her young comrade, Henry Bauer, later wrote: "She had angelic goodness, constant gentleness, endless patience, and the devotion and

self-denial of a saint. Her generosity had no limits, she tended and comforted the ill, she set everyone an example of courage and calm. Her charity was absolute: any money she received from her family was immediately distributed, right down to the last *sou*. She kept nothing for herself — her books, her clothes, her bed-linen, everything went to whoever asked for it first. I've seen her confined to her little hut for months at a time because, having given away her dress and her shoes, she had nothing to wear but a slip and camisole. Her great good heart and compassion forgave all faults and failures. She never uttered a single mean or accusing word. Her heart was a wellspring of goodness and charity." She was the living refutation of the popular image of the *pétroleuses*; she was a Sister of Charity of the Revolution; she lived her evangelical ideal of sacrifice and martyrdom. Her goodness extended to animals as well: "Any limping dog or stray cat quickly becomes her patient and her guest." Her hut was full of dogs, cats and goats who followed Louise about whenever she went out. The people in the nearby huts would complain about the smell, but Louise always won them over again with her gentleness: "Even the stubbornest of them finally yielded to her moral force."⁴³ Echoes of this moral force reached Paris and turned up in her police files: "The administrators consider her a saint."⁴⁴

Then, suddenly, the deportees' world was turned upside-down. In March of 1874, Rochefort and five comrades, with the judicious help of an English boat, managed to escape the island. The authorities were appalled and promptly sent out two "men of iron," Colonel Aleyron and Admiral Ribourt, to re-establish discipline. Guards were heavily reinforced. They marched up and down the heights of Numbo, calling the watches — "Who goes there?" To Louise's malicious eye, they looked like a presentation of *La Tour de Nesle*,* in an absurdly exotic setting.⁴⁵ "But the ridiculous was soon followed by the despicable." Deportees who were slow to line up, military fashion, for the roll-call were deprived of bread.⁴⁶ Others were put on a diet of bread, salt and dry vegetables for shirking duties "that existed only in the imagination of the government." Four women were punished for "immorality." When deportees Langlois and Place tried to defend their wives'

* an historical drama, set in medieval times, by Alexandre Dumas, Sr. — *transl. note*

conduct, they were put in the cells and fined into the bargain. Assorted other charges saw Cipriani, Fourny and Malezieux thrown into the cells as well.⁴⁷ Some other prisoners — in the infinite absurdity of all bureaucracies — found themselves being charged for refusal to work on the one hand, and rewarded for their zeal on the other.⁴⁸

The guards now used their weapons, though more to frighten than to kill.⁴⁹ New Caledonia, after all, was no Soviet or Nazi hell-hole. The 20th century, this "luminous dawn," to quote Louise Michel, has seen great improvements on the methods found in nineteenth-century concentration camps.

Louise was inflamed by Rochefort's escape, and promptly began planning her own. Unlike Rochefort, however, she had neither the gift for systematic planning nor money and her schemes, as usual, bordered on sheer romantic fantasy. One night, for example, she walked through a raging cyclone to tap at old Perusset's door. The old man, a former sea-captain, called out, "Who's there, in such weather?" and she answered, "I've come to get you." "What on earth for?" Louise explained: "The guard-boat won't be out on a night like this. We can make ourselves a raft and push out to sea. It will carry us to land somewhere, probably Sydney." Her imagination now running full tilt, she wheedled, "Why, you old sea-dog, as soon as we land, they'll give you a brig and you can come back and fetch the others..."

She went on at length, but the "old sea-dog" was wise as well as old: he wasn't going to push out on a raft, just for the pleasure of drowning himself... Louise finally marched off, slamming his door behind her. Once back in the storm, however, its awesome beauty made her forget everything else: "The sea rises like night itself, sweeping the very rocks where I stand with its huge white claws of foam..."⁵⁰ And she wrote another poem, to honour this memorable night:

*Prends un bateau, prends une planche,
Viens dans l'orage et dans la nuit.
N'attendons pas que l'aube blanche
Eclaire ceux que l'on poursuit.*

*Debout, vieux, sorcier, viens, écoute...*⁵¹

Another of her escape plans had a bit more substance to it. Louise used a false-bottomed sewing box to establish contact with the wife of a Commune deportee, a Mme Rastoul, who by then lived in Sydney. The plan called for Louise to answer at

roll-call, then slip away over the mountain and down again through the Noumea cemetery. Mme Rastoul would arrange for some dependable person to help her get aboard a boat for Sydney. Once in Sydney, Louise was to publicize the reign of terror which Aleyron and Ribourt were establishing in New Caledonia. The English authorities would be shocked by all this, and send a ship to collect the other deportees. If the English failed to act, Louise would herself return to New Caledonia. It was a fine plan, but the sewing box never made a second trip to the island.⁵²

Rochefort and his group, however, did not forget their comrades. They began raising funds to organize a guerilla attack on Noumea. Garibaldi gave 6,000 francs, all the money he had, and since he was too ill to join the expedition himself, offered his two sons in his stead. The plan, however, fell through.⁵³

Ribourt and Aleyron, systematically continuing their policy of repression, next decided that six of the female deportees (particularly dangerous women because of their "evil natures") should be removed from the camp at Numbo and resettled in the West Bay. Louise Michel and Nathalie Lemel, of course, were two of the six.⁵⁴ Nathalie objected. She made clear that she was not refusing to live in whatever hut the administration assigned to her, but that she was physically incapable of handling her own transfer, and of collecting and stacking her own firewood. Furthermore, she had built herself two chicken-coops in Numbo and put in a vegetable garden, all of which would now be lost to her. Finally, she refused to live in a common dormitory with the others, and was entitled to refuse, for the Act of Deportation established that "deportees may live either in groups or in family units" and left to the prisoners themselves "the choice of the persons with whom they wish to establish their relations."⁵⁵

Louise Michel also protested, but much more violently. She made her protest in the name of all six women, who were being treated "as if their very presence were a scandal." Male and female deportees came under the same law: "gratuitous insults should not be added to it." She therefore demanded that the authorities bring the whole business into the open by putting up wall-posters that would detail both the reasons for this new exile and the way in which the women would be treated. If the reasons were unsatisfactory then she, Louise Michel, would

continue her protest, whatever the consequences.⁵⁶

The next morning, the women were given twenty-four hours to make the move. They refused. Three or four days later, the director and the territorial commander themselves had to come to the camp and open negotiations. They promised to divide the existing barracks at West Bay into a series of small rooms so that the women could choose their own separate living-styles. And, since the prison was full at the moment, the women, despite their insubordination, would be left in peace in the Numbo settlement until the renovations were complete.⁵⁷

Louise used this breathing-space to send an account of this latest outrage to friends in Sydney, hoping they would arrange for it to be published in the *Australian Review*.⁵⁸

Life was harder at West Bay than it had been in Numbo but Louise didn't mind, as long as Nathalie was well enough to get about. She herself enjoyed living so close to the forest.⁵⁹

She continued to work, to write and to make use of Henry Bauer's books.⁶⁰ She also confided to him the misunderstanding which seemed to have arisen between Nathalie and herself. Gossip may have had less to do with this falling-out than the sheer enforced togetherness of life in a common barracks — though, of course, there certainly was malicious gossip, as in any closed community. Louise's letter on the subject to Henry Bauer was not very clear. Apparently Nathalie had visited Numbo, and listened to some "lies." "I apologize for involving you in all this back-biting; I am not accustomed to it... It appears that certain persons are amusing themselves, in a cheap and nasty manner, at the expense of both Mme Lemel and myself, and are trying to exploit a certain degree of jealousy which I, for my part, have always sought to reduce by keeping myself well to the background." In other words, it seems that Nathalie was somewhat jealous of Louise's prominence. It also seems that in some circles at least, their friendship was considered "equivocal": a particularly nasty police report was later to accuse Louise of homosexuality.⁶¹ The German sexologist, Dr. Hirschfeld, subsequently reached the same conclusion.⁶² All one can say is that there is no clear proof one way or the other.

Louise wanted to eliminate the gossip. She therefore declared to Henry Bauer that from then on, he would be her only visitor. "The people who have made me the target of their gossip and their intrigues will be disconcerted." With

customary exaggeration, she added: "If those people wish I were no longer here, then suicide would be a stupid thing to do because it would only please them. So it is better to live as if in the tomb. I could arrange it: the authorities could easily be led to increase my sentence and lock me up in the fortress in Noumea, if they thought that, as things now stand, it would be easy for me to have Paris contacts send me historical materials enabling me to work on the second part of my book."

The disagreement continued. Louise, as was her custom, offered Nathalie her "white sugar." Nathalie coldly told her to "keep it." Louise then withdrew, leaving behind some meat and wine. The next day Nathalie brought her half a papaya, which they ate together, but then she left abruptly. Louise found these pinpricks were enough to make her daily life quite unbearable. "Maybe she really doesn't notice all these little things," wondered Louise. "The people who are leading her on must hate me, but I don't know why." Perhaps Nathalie was afraid that Louise would ask for more money. Louise already owed her ten *sous*, having borrowed the sum two months earlier to send M. de Fleurville some papers and then forgotten all about it. Louise shook her head: "I don't know what to think. So, under the circumstances, the only dignified thing I can do is withdraw completely — apart from explaining all this to you as fully as I can." She simply didn't understand. "I swear to you, in the last few months I have tried so hard not to offend Nathalie in any possible way that I have censored my every word and deed. Solitude is preferable to torture such as that."⁶³

It seems that relations between Louise and Nathalie were now permanently chilled. This did not stop Louise, however, from paying tribute in her *Mémoires* to Nathalie's courage during the Commune.⁶⁴

This self-imposed "cloister" did not last for long, since it was hardly in Louise's character to play the contemplative nun.

While her personality provoked sarcasm and even hostility, it attracted just as much confidence and respect. Refugees in London raised money for the deportees which Mme Edmond Adam (Juliette Lamber) used to buy clothing which, in turn, Louise was asked to distribute.⁶⁵ The Belgian Mutual Loan Society sent a donation to the deportees, once again entrusting its distribution to Louise.⁶⁶ Louise, even in absentia, was a powerful fund-raiser. The paper, *La République française*,

organized a lottery in her name, issuing tickets bearing the slogan "PLM"* and a number. The prefecture of police launched an inquiry, but found the lottery entirely above-board.⁶⁷ Another paper, *Le Rappel*, reminded its readers that her book, *Contes*, was still available and publicized where it could be purchased.⁶⁸

Pious (and fairly probable) anecdotes made the rounds. She was offered money, according to one such story, with the words: "This money is for you." To which she replied, "Then take it back."⁶⁹

In 1878, the Melanesians rebelled. The colony was terrified⁷⁰ but Louise, true to her principles, sided with the rebels against the French. Most of the former Communards, however, rallied to the white man's cause. "I respected them a great deal, but that day, they disgusted me," Louise later told Girault.⁷¹ In her opinion — and she was right — the "Kanakas'" revolt was the same fight that the Communards had waged in 1871. "They, too, were fighting for independence, control of their own lives and liberty. I sided with them just as I sided with the rebellious, oppressed, and then defeated people of Paris."⁷² Once again, Louise was ahead of her times: in her day, when people of the Left looked at colonization they saw only the "benefits" being given a primitive people by a superior civilization. Louise chose her side without reservation: she was with the Melanesians, with the people who used slings and assegais against French rifles and howitzers, with the great chief Ataï (whose head was later sent to Paris as a war-trophy; there are head-hunters in the most unexpected places), with the tribal "bard" Andia who sang in battle and was later killed as well, with the savages in their battle against the ranged forces of civilized man: colonists, administrators and whites in general.⁷³ "We must put an end to the superiority which manifests itself only in destruction."⁷⁴

This was much more than a sentimental choice. With Louise, feelings always led to actions. She taught the rebels how to cut telegraphic wires, thereby shutting down the island's entire communication system.⁷⁵ She sent documents to Paris that exposed the massacres of indigenous people that had taken place⁷⁶ and a volume of verse (probably *Les Océanien-nes*) which was to be published with all proceeds reserved for

* "Pour Louise Michel," "For Louise Michel" — *transl. note*

victims of the repression.⁷⁷

Paris officialdom continued to worry about this troublesome deportee. The minister of Justice asked the minister of War for her dossier. The psychological portrait found within was hardly flattering: hard-hearted, untouched by female sensitivity, she ignores her aged mother and thinks only of establishing an abominable social regime; she's sick in the head. Not surprisingly, given that analysis, the best military minds of the ministry of War found "no reason to commute her sentence, especially in view of the fact that no request for pardon has been entered."⁷⁸ The prison authorities were somewhat less hostile, even though they felt she had "ultra-revolutionary ideas." Her character was highly "exalted," but her conduct and morals were "tolerable"! She occupied her time with "needlework, culture and literary science and [was] sufficiently docile." However, "she [thought] all her fellow deportees who asked for pardon were cowards..." Even so, the authorities felt she had "sufficiently" atoned for her sins.⁷⁹ And so, on May 8, 1879, Louise Michel's sentence of banishment to a fortress was commuted to simple banishment.⁸⁰

In fact, Louise had already been allowed to settle in Noumea (in early 1879). Deportees who had served five years of their sentences and had remunerative trades were allowed to live in the city, on condition that they report to the penal authorities every time a ship left for Europe and that they not go more than eight kilometres from their residences or change residence.⁸¹

Louise resumed her profession of schoolteacher. Clemenceau sent her a very timely money order for twenty francs but even so, working from six in the morning to ten at night, she still was unable to pay off the debts incurred in moving to Noumea. She asked him to send her different representations of landscapes and heads which she could use in her drawing classes.⁸² At first, her school had only fifteen pupils, all of them children of deportees, but she soon earned general respect in the community. The colony had just established a system of non-sectarian schools under a commission of municipal instruction which consisted of a local businessman, M. Peuch, an amnestied deportee, M. Armand, and the municipal lawyer as chairman, M. Latomus. Louise Michel's reputation was now so securely established that the mayor, M. Simon, gave her a

salary of 720 francs and full responsibility for music and drawing lessons in the girls' school.⁸³

Louise also spent a great deal of time teaching the Melanesians. They crowded into her house every Sunday, morning to night. Among them was Daoumi's brother,* who wanted to learn "what white men know" and take it back to his tribe. These tribes had a very great respect for all those who would teach them to read: even at the height of their revolt, they had spared the Marist brothers.⁸⁴

Louise tried to invent new pedagogical methods that would be more appropriate for these "primitives." She experimented with using a stick to point out the letters being read, with tracing numbers and musical notes on the wall, with writing with movable letters, and with starting mathematical instruction with algebra rather than arithmetic, since the "Kanakas" had no concept of large numbers. "Sheer curiosity for the unknown attracts them even more than we do, I think. So you have to teach them quickly, with a great deal of animation."⁸⁵

Now that her life was somewhat easier, she could dust off her old plans to go exploring. Charles Malato, the only other Commune deportee to "go native," had by then spent two years studying the independent tribes. He told Louise of his discoveries and together they dreamed of setting out on foot to explore the east coast of the island and to follow the Diahot river from its source to its mouth. Such an expedition, of course, would require Louise to wear masculine attire (and that must have appealed to her). One day, as they discussed the project, Malato asked her, "Do you know how to swim?" "No," she answered. But nothing ever stopped her. "I'd just grab a plank and you'd tow me in."⁸⁶ The idea of playing pilot couldn't have made Malato very happy, because the project died then and there.

They found, however, that they had more in common than a taste for exploration. The defeat of the Commune and subsequent deportation had turned them both into anarchists and so, with a few other like-minded deportees, they formed a study circle. They couldn't have known much of Bakunin's work or of the Jura Federation but even so, "Bakunin's

* Louise, hopelessly romantic, tells us that Daoumi had by then died of his love for a white woman — *author's note*

influence helped define the libertarian idea which revolutionaries knew under the name of Anarchism. This idea...was in the air, so much so that we adopted the same name, even though we were halfway round the world, stuck on the Ducos Peninsula, quite ignorant of what was happening in Europe or the deliberations of the Jura Federation."⁸⁷ One can just see Louise and her comrades pacing the beaches under the unsuspecting eyes of the administration and its guards, endlessly debating the best way to topple the old world and shape the new.

Some of the deportees were pardoned. Louise was very much opposed to individual pardons (as distinct from a collective pardon for all) and bitterly angry with the "cowards" who had begged to be pardoned, "just so they could see France once again. This is shameful behaviour, unworthy behaviour, and it inspires in me only anger and disgust." Even so, she tried to smooth the way for the old people who would now be returning to Paris. She worried about this in a letter to Clemenceau: "Dear old Malezieux, the dean of the deportees, is already back. Now there's another group of old people on the way. What's to become of them? I'm so sorry that poor old Mabilie won't just stay here in New Caledonia where, at least, he can live. Where in Paris will he find work suitable for his age and failing strength? What gates will the Republic throw open for these poor old men and women? Perhaps Bicêtre?"^{*88} She wrote Hugo in much the same vein: "What are these seventy-year-olds to do?" She continued, "My memories of you have strengthened me as much as some other memories have hurt me... I am as calm as the very tombs where my brothers sleep."⁸⁹

As far as Louise herself was concerned, there was no question of her own individual return to France. She would go back only if a general amnesty were declared. As she wrote Clemenceau: "With them all, or not at all. Nobody has the right to try to make me change my mind." She congratulated him for his energetic devotion to the democratic cause, "at a time when wishy-washy time-serving is so much in style."⁹⁰ She wrote her old friend of Empire and Commune days, André Léo: "I don't expect them to grant a full and complete

^{*} i.e. the mental hospital in the village of Bicêtre, just outside Paris — *transl. note*

amnesty, and I'm not interested in anything less. Many others feel as I do, so we shall stay here... I would consider any yielding on this point such a crime, whatever the circumstances, that I would have no desire to live thereafter... Poor old Malezieux never asked for a pardon, yet he received one. I would never forgive anyone who took such steps against my own clear wishes."⁹¹

But, back in France, Louise was becoming more and more a *cause célèbre*. A postal clerk in the Loudon vicinity asked that she be pardoned since "she truly repents the errors into which she was led by her own over-zealous heart and her submission to the other leaders of the Commune."⁹² A tax collector in Mansle went even farther. He too wished to see her pardoned, but *he* intended to marry her, because he recognized the "fine qualities" of "this poor woman who was led astray by the dazzling banners of the Commune."⁹³ Louise would have been absolutely furious had she ever known about these letters filed neatly away in her dossier. As well, there was a particularly heart-rending petition going the rounds, the work of a schoolteacher named Mme Hardouin, who had been tried and acquitted by the Councils of War on a charge of malicious gossip. A few words are enough to establish the style: "Far from her aged mother, under the burning Caledonian skies, Louise Michel, former Montmartre schoolteacher, has not yet appeared on the amnesty list..."⁹⁴ *La Révolution française* set up a special postbox to receive petitions in her favour, open daily from two in the afternoon to midnight.⁹⁵ *Le Petit Méridional* reported that a petition then circulating in Sète was covered with signatures.⁹⁶ Same story in Marseille, and in Béziers.⁹⁷ The noble side of Louise Michel was being trotted out on view: "The naval officers who saw her daily for the four-month sea voyage were amazed at the serenity, self-sacrifice and devotion of this heroic woman."⁹⁸ Officialdom was moved to act. Her sentence of deportation was reduced to ten years of banishment.⁹⁹ "That," noted *La Révolution* acidly, "was not our objective."¹⁰⁰

Louise Michel was predictably annoyed when — some months later — she heard about all this agitation. She wrote immediately to M. Grévy, president of the Republic. It was a dignified and, for once, highly reasonable letter. "*M. le président de la République*, please consider as null and void all steps which, though taken in my name, outrage my honour... I

completely dissociate myself from all actions undertaken by Mme Céleste Hardouin and also from all actions which have been taken or may be taken by other, equally ill-advised people. I shall only return to France if accompanied by all other Commune deportees I would not even consider returning under any other conditions whatsoever."¹⁰¹

The French newspapers published the letters in which Louise repudiated the steps being taken in her name.¹⁰² The next rumour to circulate was that Céleste Hardouin was, in fact, a police agent.¹⁰³ One way or another, saint or devil incarnate, Louise Michel was now established as a symbol. Somebody at a public meeting in Marseille proposed that she be named honorary chairman; the proposal, amidst general uproar, was finally voted down.¹⁰⁴

On October 16, Louise was forgiven the rest of her sentence.¹⁰⁵ The minister of War sent appropriate notification of this fact to the minister of the Navy and the Colonies on December 24, and it was duly passed on to the colony on January 23, 1880.¹⁰⁶ Administrative machinery is not noted for the rapidity of its internal communications.

Louise, however, kept her word. She did not return to France until a total amnesty was declared for all Commune deportees on July 11, 1880.

The same post which brought her news of the general amnesty also brought word that her mother had just been stricken with paralysis. Thanks to the money she had earned as a schoolteacher, she did not need to wait for the official repatriation but could buy her own ticket on a packet-boat to Sydney. Melanesians crowded the docks to see her off. They wept (for she had promised to establish a school for the tribes in the countryside) and cried out, "You'll never come back..." "Yes, I shall," she cried in return, as the boat pulled slowly away.¹⁰⁷

X - TRIUMPH

Louise's old fascination with travel reappeared as soon as she was aboard ship. Sydney delighted her, with its pink granite rocks "like giant towers."¹ But she immediately found herself confronting officialdom once again: her papers were judged inadequate and she was required to prove her identity. Worse still, the French consul refused to repatriate her. "Very well," Louise told him, "I shall stay here and finance my passage by giving public lectures." "On what topic?" "On the French administration in Noumea, the horrors being perpetrated by Aleyron and Ribourt, the causes of the Kanaka rebellion, the slave trade being carried on under the pretext of providing Blacks with job opportunities..." The consul reconsidered. Louise was ushered aboard the *John Helder* immediately, joining nineteen other repatriates who were also sailing back to France.

To her, Melbourne looked like a chessboard set down on a plain. While passing through the Suez Canal, one amnestied Arab passenger died with his face turned toward Mecca, the city to which he had promised to make his pilgrimage. Louise saw everything, noted everything: the quivering papyrus on the banks of the Nile, the kneeling camels with their necks stretched out on the sand, the Sphinx-shaped rocks, the endless sweep of desert.² She had circled the world. Just short of London, November 7, the *John Helder* was caught by dense fog and forced to hold its position in the Channel for a week. "The siren wailed constantly, it was like a dream-world."³ Louise had

been worrying about her paralyzed mother throughout the long voyage. Would she arrive in time?

Some exiles came out on the Thames in fishing boats to welcome the returning deportees. They sang, just as they had in the days of the Commune:

Bonhomme, bonhomme,

Il est temps que tu te réveilles...⁴

The 1874 manifesto of the group of the Revolutionary Commune proved that these exiles, like Louise, had analyzed their defeat and were now ready to make their conclusions public: "We are atheist, because man can never be free until he evicts God from his mind and his spirit... We are communist, because we wish all natural resources and the instruments of production to belong to the Community... We are revolutionary, because we wish...to overthrow by force a society which maintains itself by force...because we wish to seize political power through the dictatorship of the proletariat." The Commune was the revolutionary proletariat which, through its dictatorship, would wipe out privilege and the bourgeoisie. The manifesto denounced "the fraud of universal suffrage," and radical politics (the last refuge of bourgeois power); it claimed responsibility for the fires set during the last days of the Commune and for the executions both of Generals Lecomte and Clément Thomas and of the hostages. The purpose of all these actions had been to destroy "the instruments of monarchic and bourgeois oppression" and, as well, to protect the combatants. The manifesto was the work of Commune refugees — Eudes, Vaillant, Moreau, etc. — and Louise supported it wholeheartedly.⁵

But she didn't linger in England: she wanted to see her mother. Comrades bought her a ticket for Paris and saw her off at the train station. English, German, Austrian, Russian and French revolutionaries together, they all acclaimed her and joined in singing the "Marseillaise." Victor Dave, who had recently been expelled from France, spoke for them all when he recalled her "dignified, proud, fearless" stand before the Council of War, and expressed the wish that other Frenchwomen follow her example. Louise, in reply, spoke not in her own name but in the name of the one, indivisible Revolution: "The encouragement of revolutionary Europe will give the proletariat of France the courage and devotion which they will need in order to complete the great work of justice begun for them by the Paris

Commune."⁶

Some friends were waiting at Dieppe; at the next stop, Marie Ferré. Paris was waiting to welcome her home. Back in August, a police spy had written: "It appears that Louise Michel will be given a reception upon her return. It is expected to be grander than anything ever staged before."⁷ A brochure was published for the occasion, all proceeds to the amnestied deportees, about Louise Michel's appearance before the Council of War.⁸ *Le Citoyen* published some of the letters she had written while in prison, giving special prominence to her violent missive to General Appert.⁹ The Regional Workers' Congress and the revolutionary socialists of Ménilmontant both named her honorary chairman of their meetings.¹⁰ The paper, *La Libre Pensée*, cheered her arrival: "She will be carried in triumph right to her door."¹¹ Money was raised to send a delegation of women to meet her train in Brest (though, in the end, she came via Dieppe instead).¹² Henry Bauer filled the pages of *L'Intransigeant* with all the pious old anecdotes about Louise Michel's life in New Caledonia.¹³ Cipriani called on all revolutionary socialists to meet her at Saint-Lazare station and there pay tribute to "the virtue and devotion, courage and self-sacrifice incarnate in this woman worthy of another age."¹⁴ In short, from the beginning of November on, "Paris quivered with excitement," as one policeman put it in the inimitable style peculiar to documents from that source. All Paris was mobilized to receive the heroine, the Commune's living symbol.¹⁵

At 10 a.m. on November 9, a huge crowd surged into the courtyard of the Saint-Lazare station. By 11 a.m., traffic on Rue d'Amsterdam and Place du Havre was completely blocked. Police agents, under the supervision of Prefect Andrieux, prevented the crowd from moving onto the platform itself. Even so, two hundred people managed to enter the station: among them Clemenceau, Rochefort, Louis Blanc, Olivier Pain, Clovis Hugues, old Cipriani, the full editorial boards from three of the opposition papers (*Le Mot d'ordre*, *L'Intransigeant*, *La Lanterne*) and a number of women, including Nathalie Lemel, Hubertine Auclert, Olympe Audouard, Mme Cadolle, and the overzealous Céleste Hardouin. The men's buttonholes bloomed with red flowers.

The Dieppe train arrived fifteen minutes late, at 12:47. The whole station became a pushing, scrambling sea of enthusiasm.

Police roughed up some women trying to get through with flowers for Louise; Humbert and Cipriani protested, and were immediately arrested for insulting police officers.

And then she appeared: tall, thin, her face wrinkled and burnt "by the New Caledonian sun," "an old peasant exhausted by years of toiling the land." She was dressed, as always, in her devil's garb of black: a black jacket, black merino skirt, strands of grey hair escaping her little hat trimmed with black jets and a bunch of red carnations. The crowd shouted, "Long live Louise Michel! Long live the Commune! Long live the Social Revolution! Long live Humanity!"

Louise embraced her old comrades Clemenceau and Rochefort and then somehow worked her way through the surging throng of 6-8,000 people (*Le Figaro* reported 20,000) to a waiting fiacre, which she mounted along with two other women. Rochefort's son and one of *L'Intransigeant's* editors followed close behind. More than two thousand demonstrators, singing the "Marseillaise," accompanied the two carriages down the street. Louise went straight to the home of her cousin Galès, a haberdasher on Rue Saint-Honoré. Seven people were roughed up in a general shoving match that took place on Rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin.¹⁶

Meanwhile, Clemenceau and Rochefort had gone to the police station in an effort to free Humbert and Cipriani. In vain. The prefect had given orders for the two men to be transferred to the central jail to await their appearance before the courts on a charge of insulting police officers.¹⁷ "It is not the Republic we see all around us," Humbert later wrote in *Le Mot d'ordre*, "it is the law of the billy-club. It is the Empire without the emperor."¹⁸

Louise ignored it all: she wanted only to see Marianne. At three o'clock that afternoon she appeared at the Gare de l'Est and was greeted by Rochefort, Olivier Pain and some twenty women, all wearing corsages of red flowers.¹⁹ Then, accompanied by Marie Ferré and one of her aunts, she boarded the train for Lagny.²⁰ While the train was stopped in Raincy, a man cried, "Long live the Social Revolution!" and Louise threw him one of her bouquets.²¹

From Lagny, she took a post-chaise to Conches, where her mother was now living with her sister Catherine. Journalists followed, hounding Louise every step of the way, for her return was front-page news. Reporters from *L'Événement*, *Le Figaro*

and *Les Contemporains* all turned up, determined to interview her and anyone else they could find. Félicien Champsaur went to the end of a lonely road deep in a tiny valley, and there found himself two peasants to interrogate. One had never heard of Louise Michel. The other wanted to know if she was the woman who had just been given that amazing welcome and, if so, why. Events used to disappear somewhere between Paris and the countryside, evaporate into the silence of the fields and the little homes that had squatted by the roadsides for centuries. The people didn't read the papers, and there was no other source of information.

The *L'Événement* reporter found Louise and three other women seated by the fireside. Wild cats, which Louise had brought back with her from New Caledonia, roamed the room. Louise, he thought, had become "girlish" again. No more ornaments or bouquets, "no air of exaltation." But when he asked if her Paris reception had pleased her, her face took on a "strange" expression. "If my mother had died before I could see her again," she said, "I would have killed Gambetta."* What she wanted to do now was continue the work begun by the Commune. But she also had to live, and that meant she had to find work.²²

The man from *Le Figaro* first met Marie Ferré, seated at Louise's side, "a small woman with curly hair, rosy cheeks and a mischievous look in her eye." He described Louise as well: a broad, rather masculine forehead and a bony face, "indicative of her blunt, energetic character, all sharp angles as is typical of mannish women and rebellious natures." He didn't want to show Louise a copy of his newspaper, but she laughed and told him, "But it's the one I particularly want to see." She then scanned this reactionary paper's account of her reception. "Well, it's not as ridiculous as I thought it would be." She read on. "I didn't think anybody would notice the most comical thing about the whole demonstration yesterday..."

The reporter told her there was talk of nominating her in the forthcoming municipal elections. "I'd accept, even if people

* though Gambetta was not yet prime minister, he was widely assumed to have been responsible for Waddington's refusal to grant the Communards a general amnesty. Though they were granted one in the end, as we know, it came later than it might otherwise have done (people assumed). Therefore, reasoned Louise, had she just missed seeing her mother alive, it would have been Gambetta's fault — *transl. note*

voted me in as a joke. It would pave the way for women who aspire to public office. Others would follow me and then female emancipation would be won.”²³

Félicien Champsaur (of *Les Contemporains*) noted the contrast between Louise’s rough appearance and that of old Marianne, with her white hair, soft eyes and simple, gentle ways. “We have our disputes,” said Louise, “and we don’t always come to an agreement. To avoid hurting her, I don’t tell her all my opinions, I skip certain details...” Her mother protested at this explanation. Champsaur concluded that Louise was “a Red nun,” whose “feelings had been led astray,” who loved only her cats and the common people.²⁴

L’Intransigeant, by dispatch, asked her for an exclusive account of her return. She refused: “Even though I allowed myself to be honoured with a reception, you know perfectly well that I want the focal point to be not my own personality, but the Social Revolution and the women of that Revolution.” Anyway, it was all a blank in her mind; she’d been thinking only of her mother. “The first thing I remember is the Strasbourg station. I saw this enormous crowd, the people whom I loved very much even before I went away and whom I love even more now that I have returned from the desert.” She closed with a statement of nihilistic faith: “My mind was dominated by a single thought: only a single head should be put at risk, not the lives of all these beloved people. The nihilists are right.”²⁵

Louise needed crowds, she needed to plunge into their midst, make direct contact in crowded halls, whether the reception was enthusiastic or hostile. From then on, she was to do exactly that. Though she was now being courted on all sides, she chose to speak first in Montmartre at the Mont des Martyrs, the spot where, on the morning of March 18, she had charged the slope, weapon in hand, and fought for the Commune. “I stood with Montmartre then. I’ll stand with Montmartre now.”²⁶

Throughout Louise’s two-week stay in Conches, Paris continued to buzz with stories of her return. It caused Rochefort to ask: “What draws the people so irresistibly to this strange woman who has returned from the far edge of the world in exactly the same state as when she left for it, with neither boot nor petticoat to her name, as unconcerned about tomorrow as she is unworried about yesterday, no more

overwhelmed by the thundering ovations that now greet her than she once was by the chassepot rifles levelled at her breast...? From the outraged indignation of the agents of authority, it would appear that M. Jules Ferry* takes every cry of 'Long live Louise Michel' as a direct and personal insult."²⁷ Rochefort, ever the good rationalist, concluded that the people's esteem for Louise Michel stemmed from her behaviour before the Council of War. That was undoubtedly true, but there was more to it than that. Louise had the magic, the charisma that is found for better or worse in every person whose mere presence can stir a crowd to frenzy. Such power is rare among women. Looking at more contemporary figures, I would say that only La Pasionaria or Edith Piaf could be said to have rivalled Louise Michel in this respect.

"Whatever one makes of Louise Michel," wrote *Le Petit Parisien*, "none may dispute the moral force of her powerful character."²⁸ *Le Grand Journal*, on the other hand, wrote: "What crowds! What acclaim! What brawls! What drunkenness! What smashed ribs!... Louise Michel lays claim to the title of *pétroleuse* as if it were an honour. Poor woman! She is devoured by mad pride... She believes herself inspired, chosen, destined to put humanity on the right path with a jar of petrol."²⁹

News of her arrival spread beyond the borders. The Verviers "En Avant" circle³⁰ and Catalan anarchists sent their regards.³¹

But there was hard political infighting going on beneath all the surface glory. Who would have the use of Louise Michel? Clemenceau drew on their old friendship and asked her to join the campaign he was leading against Opportunism.**³² "I won't attend any meeting until I have appeared in Montmartre," replied Louise.³³ Anarchists and collectivists, who hoped to carry her off for themselves, looked with great disfavour at this friendship with a "moderate."³⁴

Louise finally made her triumphant return: Salle Elysée-Montmartre, Sunday, November 21. The meeting, organized by the Social Study Circle of the eighteenth arrondissement, was called for mid-day. By 11:30, crowds were filling the hall, consisting largely of workers and amnestied Communards, and

* then Prime Minister of France

** the radical Republican's name for Gambettists — *transl. notes*

a few women. Two thousand people, said some reports; four thousand, said others. A bust of the Republic was at the front of the room, a red kerchief on its head and a red sash criss-crossed about the shoulders. And behind this Republic, which stood not for the bourgeois republic but for the Social Republic, was a forest of red flags and two prominently-displayed black banners of anarchism, trimmed in scarlet and bearing the date, 1871. Copies of the anarchist paper, *Ni Dieu ni maître*, were on sale in the hall.

Whatever her reasons — grand actress or inspired seer who loses all track of time — Louise kept her audience waiting. (This was to become habitual.) Finally, at 1:30 p.m., she and Gambon (a former Communard) entered the hall. The crowd shouted, "Long live Louise Michel! Long live the Commune! Long live the Social Revolution!" And also, "Long live the Republic!" Gambon led them in a round of applause for Louise, whom he compared to Joan of Arc, and then said, "It is not enough to be the party of liberty, equality, fraternity; we must also be the party of justice."

Louise wore her customary black, a red flower in her hat. She accepted the bouquets pressed on her "in the name of the Social Revolution and of the women who have fought for their emancipation."³⁵

The ceremony had begun, the priestess started to speak. "We are back. We walk alone, out in front, for we know whom we wish to strike, and we shall do so not for vengeance but for justice... We seek no personal vengeance and we take pride in our dear ones who are dead, for their memory will fill our hearts each time we strike..." She celebrated this particular service in honour of Ferré. The name was not mentioned, but his presence was there, behind the spoken words. "We heard the shots on Satory Plain. We know who was responsible..."

She saw the day approaching when religions would be dead and churches silent, outlived by the people. Outlived by the Commune. "We're like ancient battle-flags, riddled with bullet holes. A few more holes will make no difference. We are marked for sacrifice; we know it, and we accept it. Not for our own sakes, but for those who are dead. And on the anniversary of those deaths, we shall link arms above their graves. I left here in a state of emotional tumult. I return cold and calm. We were generous, once, but we shall be so no longer. You have broken our hearts. So much the better. Now we shall be implacable."

And then, an open invitation to direct action, to tyrannicide: "We shall not shrink from any duty, whoever the man that we must strike, be he friend or family. We shall fight those who oppose us and social justice... We must put an end to an age in which mothers go mad with grief and children die. When the hour finally comes, I shall ask permission to be the first to strike."³⁶

Cheers, shouts and applause rocked the hall. Arnold (an ex-member of the Commune), Joffrin and the other speakers who had to follow her, were very pale stuff by comparison. The meeting ended at 5:30 the way it had begun, with cries of "Long live the Commune! Long live the Social Revolution! Long live Louise Michel!" People rushed to shake her hand.³⁷ The high priestess of anarchism had made a triumphant return. The cafes in the district filled with people, who agreed that she had been "sublime."³⁸ The younger generation of Communards, who had known her only by reputation, had been very much impressed by her conviction and her uncompromising language. "They're just waiting to take to the streets again," wrote one of Prefect Andrieux's informers.³⁹

The bourgeoisie was badly frightened, the "angel of petrol" had returned. "It's finally happened. The Commune of 1871 has risen from its ashes and yesterday made its first public appearance at the foot of Montmartre hill... The Commune adherents are more dangerous and less repentant than ever before."⁴⁰ Wrote *Le Pays*: "This woman must be taken seriously. The acclaim which she now enjoys can only inflame her even more. She knows no limits, if she doesn't manage to stir others to action she'll strike out alone, prepared to sacrifice herself like a new Charlotte Corday."⁴¹ The most dangerous thing about Louise Michel, wrote *Le National*, was that "she doesn't indulge in idle talk." She exalted nihilism, "that contagious malady from the east" and organized "workshops on the techniques of murder." Nihilism, the paper explained, was "coldblooded crime by contract; the supreme mandate of the knife."⁴² It seemed inevitable that Louise would assume the leadership of the revolutionary movement.⁴³

But it put the Republicans in a difficult position. All this talk of violence on the very eve of the elections could only lose

* Charlotte Corday d'Armont (1768 - 93), guillotined for stabbing Marat to death in his bath — *transl. note*

them votes.⁴⁴

Louise next went to lay her bouquets reverently on Ferré's grave.⁴⁵ She had become a star, she guaranteed full houses, and everybody wanted to claim her services. Belleville followed Montmartre. On November 30 in Salle Graffard (138 Boul. de Ménilmontant), Louise described for the two thousand (some said five thousand) members of her audience the "ghost ship" which had carried the survivors back from New Caledonia. The ritual of her appearances was already established. First the crowd would spend an hour or so milling about the hall. There would be red flags and red flowers, which Louise would accept "in the name of the Social Revolution." Then shouts, acclamation, cries of "Long live Louise Michel! Long live the Social Revolution! Long live the Commune!" Then she'd speak. This time, she said: "Despite the 34,000 dead, despite the persecutions and the deportation, the Revolution has returned. It will crush all those who oppose it, as a locomotive crushes any obstacle in its tracks..." She attacked Gambetta, the "Opportunist." "We owe our amnesty to the people, not to him." Marie Ferré was there, her face stern and set. Louise reminded the crowd of the crimes of Satory, and so once again invoked Ferré's memory.⁴⁶

"Criminal emotionalism by the Virago of the rabble," cried *Le Journal du soir*.⁴⁷ "Queen of the scum," "*delirium tremens*," "a terrifying display."⁴⁸

Prefect Andrieux's informers were working flat out. Louise Michel's entourage was riddled with them. Truth, falsehood, gossip — the reports piled up on the police prefect's desk, all grist to the mill. Item: during a dinner at the home of Mme Noro (13 Boul. Rochechouart), Louise quarrelled with Mme Hardouin on the subject of Ferré and left in a temper, slamming the door.⁴⁹ The agents dogged her steps. She still lived with her mother in Conches, they reported, but when in Paris stayed with Marie Ferré at 76 Rue d'Aboukir. Rochefort, they said, paid her expenses.⁵⁰ She was asked to speak in Saint-Etienne at the inauguration of the city's first non-sectarian school.⁵¹ On her very first day back in France, said one report, she had turned to Rochefort and asked, "Now that I'm here, shall I kill Gambetta?" Rochefort was supposed to have been horrified and to have evaded the question: "We'll discuss that later..."⁵² But not to worry: one of the informers, named Gontran, felt her popularity was already on the wane.

"Her halo won't last long. Soon she'll fall to her proper level, as one of the more vulgar of the socialists."⁵³

This prediction notwithstanding, Louise continued her triumphal round of meetings. She went to Salle Rivoli for the Union of Socialist Women and said: "The time has come to take our place in society... We want free marriage, in which men no longer hold proprietary rights over women... We want equal education."

Her political position was clearly anarchist. She never called for political rights for women, since such rights were an illusion anyway. "Women want no part of the Chamber or of the Senate... The people must come to understand that we are working on their behalf, and that oppressing women drags everybody down that much farther."⁵⁴ Police informer Hilaire⁵⁵ reported, "This woman dominates her stage like a great actress."

On December 4, Rochefort joined Louise in Salle Lévis, where he talked about her years in New Caledonia. "It is possible to help your brothers and sisters without taking the veil and the self-aggrandizing title of Sister of Charity."⁵⁶

Everybody wanted to use her: *La Libre Pensée* on December 6,⁵⁷ *Le Prolétaire* to celebrate its second anniversary on December 7.⁵⁸ Day after day, Louise gave speeches, attended meetings. She received a delirious welcome in Salle Chayne on December 8. The crowd jumped to its feet, the men waving their hats and the women their handkerchiefs. Louise spoke to them of the need for unity among all revolutionary forces: "We don't mean that one group should absorb the others, we want unity of all the groups who, even if they don't agree on every single detail...are still pursuing the same universal goal." (The problem of the union of the Left is no recent phenomenon, unfortunately.) Then she attacked Gambetta. "We've had enough of this eyepatch kingdom with its one-eyed dictators... [Roars of laughter; Gambetta had lost an eye] ...where it is always the people who pay the price for the ambitious and the over-indulged..." There were cries of bravo, but also some heckling. "Let them speak," retorted Louise, "and don't bother with the stoolpigeons. We all have to live somehow."⁵⁹

The government was not amused. The police prefect ordered his superintendents to keep a particularly close watch on any meeting at which Louise Michel was to speak. "If these

attacks continue, she is to be charged immediately.”⁶⁰ And so the first sheets of paper began to accumulate in what is now an enormous stack of documentation, still sitting today in the Paris police archives. (I know it’s still there; I’ve been through it all to the point of nausea.)

Louise went with Paule Minck and Blanqui to Salle des Ecoles. Said Blanqui: “The name of Louise Michel echoes throughout Europe. It restores French glory, it erases the memory of our defeats. Women used to follow men, though they were close behind. Now we have faltered so badly that it is the women who lead and we, from our distant position in the rear, must follow them.”⁶¹ Louise, in turn, expressed her wish that the Grand Old Man* would live to see the dawn of the Revolution, which was already advancing so rapidly.⁶²

“Gambettism,” insisted Louise at Tivoli-Vaux-Hall on December 12, “that’s the enemy. When the time comes, I’ll head the first group to hit the streets.”⁶³ The informers were run ragged that day trying to keep up, for she went from Tivoli-Vaux-Hall straight to the Oberkampf theatre.⁶⁴ Being a spy is no easy life! Louise attacked Gambetta yet again, told her audience he was no better than Thiers: “He not only wants to fight foreigners, he declares war on socialists as well.” He was reported to have stolen some letters which could prove compromising for Rochefort. The people should unite against him, “topple him as we toppled the Empire, in a wave of public contempt.”⁶⁵

On December 23, Louise and Blanqui made another joint appearance. Louise attacked that symbol of the bourgeois republic, the Tricolour flag, “the emblem” of Sedan and Gambetta, the mass graves of the vanquished and Satory. “What are you waiting for? Make the Revolution, if you have the courage...”⁶⁶

On December 26, *La Libre Pensée* sponsored a meeting at which Louise addressed herself to young people in particular: they had to learn that we need “neither God nor master,” and that the only guide is the law of individual conscience. “He dies well who dies in the knowledge that he has been of use to his fellow man.”⁶⁷ And young people responded, in the form of a letter signed by a dozen medical students, five law students, one student of Oriental languages (named Akour Bey) and a

* i.e. Blanqui — *transl. note*

drop-out (I sympathize) from the Ecole des Chartes. They admired the way she had defended the people's cause: "Our fathers bled under the guns of Versailles," and so they asked to join "the great undertaking, which we claim both the right and the duty to defend." They would be there, they promised, "when the time came to bare their chests to the cannon."⁶⁸

Louise had all the instincts of a good propagandist: she capitalized on everything that happened. Blanqui died on January 4, 1881. Louise called on the citizenry to join the funeral procession of this man who had "never stopped fighting for humanity."⁶⁹ And so, the next day at Père-Lechaise, all the revolutionary groups were on hand. Rochefort was there, Vallès, Eudes, Vaillant, Lissagaray. Eudes spoke for the Blanquists; Lepelletier for *La Libre Pensée*; Susini for revolutionary socialism. Suddenly, the crowd parted and Louise Michel appeared. She was like an apparition from the grave herself, trailing her customary widow's veils. Her words were slow, almost a chant: "Blanqui, your death consecrates the cause. The longer they held this man in prison [a reference to his many years in prison], the more the Idea gained ground." Then the martyr theme: "Should they attempt to slaughter us for your beliefs, we would rush to embrace our death... This tomb is a blazing torch for Liberty and Universal Revolution." She continued her slow litany: "Blanqui, we salute you. We do so in the name of the entire world, in the name of the Social Revolution in Russia, more powerful than our own, in the name of the dead of 1871, of Rigault, of Ferré, in the name of France herself, who calls for one thing: deliverance from tyranny by any name, be it Empire or Opportunism." Finally, the call to commitment: "On Blanqui's tomb, let us swear to continue the fight."

They cried, "Long live Louise Michel! Long live the Social Revolution!"

Paule Minck was to have spoken as well, but couldn't push her way through the crowd. The police agents who had so gallantly cleared a path for Louise Michel now, with equal gallantry, saw her back to 169 Rue de la Roquette, where she climbed into fiacre No. 8022. They saw all, noted all. Louise thanked the policemen, courtesy for courtesy. Later, however, she gave another version of that exchange: "I told them it was shameful work they were doing, but that the disgrace fell on their masters, not on them."⁷⁰

A knot of people surrounded her fiacre, singing the "Marseillaise" and the "Chant du Départ," forcing her cab to circle the Place de la Bastille before letting her go. A successful demonstration.⁷¹

Louise was more than fifty years old by now, but she still had the sensitivity of poets and young girls. Every time she was moved, she wrote a poem. This time, it was about Blanqui's death. She sent it to Cipriani who was in exile and thus unable to attend the service:

*La mort, après dix ans de bagne,
A pris le vieux de la montagne...
Eh bien oui, nous meurtriers.
Eh bien oui, lâche et vile meute,
C'était le père de l'émeute
Et nous sommes les émeutiers...*

She called on the people "to weary, finally, of slavery," to carry out, "riot by riot," a truly egalitarian revolution. She evoked:

*L'idée éblouissante et pure
Qui monte et grandit sans mesure,
Quand l'être retourne au néant.*

She pictured the rising tide of nations, which would attack power and privilege and demand their International:

*Debout pour les luttes dernières,
Nihilistes, incendiaires,
Esclaves, Jacques, serrons-nous,
Tous ceux qui n'ont ni Dieu ni maîtres,
Qui ne sont ni valets ni traîtres
Saluons notre père à tous.⁷²*

It was ceremonial verse, the sort that she had written upon the death of Bishop Sibour and poets laureate address to fallen kings.

And she received verse as well. Clovis Hugues sent her a Serenade:

*Puisque les chroniqueurs pour distraire leurs maîtres
Font de l'esprit sur nous, au doux bruit des écus,
Puisque nous égayons les muscadins des lettres,
Puisqu'on me fait chanter des vers sous ta fenêtre,
Nous redirons nos deuils, notre espérance austère
Nous qui sans remords
Regardons la terre
Où dorment les morts.⁷³*

Louise excited some, appalled others. "A poor old

madwoman," wrote her in anguish from the depths of the countryside: "You have wilfully put yourself in the hands of the devil... Tremble, tremble. The holy moment of repentance is at hand. Take pity on this poor sick woman whose cure depends on your conversion."⁷⁴ The worthy M. Fayet, former rector of the Académie de Chaumont, was embroiled in a bitter polemic about the nature of Louise Michel's religious upbringing.⁷⁵ He talked about her pious youth, and tried to lead her back to the paths of righteousness. Louise addressed her answer directly to him rather than to the journalists, for she knew his sincerity: "It is precisely because I believed in God in my youth that I now feel compelled to free education from this obscurantist error... Having both common sense and, more importantly, a sense of justice and equality, I could not believe for long in God the unjust, the eternal tyrant and tormentor." She could no longer believe in a religion "which degrades and debases with its doctrine of a reward in heaven." Since she wanted a new world, a world free from injustice, it was only logical that she should devote herself to the Social Revolution.⁷⁶

M. Fayet gave up trying to change her mind, but he did offer a fatherly warning about "the ambitious ones who applaud you, but whose real goal is to overthrow the government in order to seize power themselves... The Social Revolution that you seek will not change human nature." There would always be antagonism between the successful and the failures of this world. But it was impossible to talk religion and politics with her as long as she was "dazzled by public acclaim." He urged her to make a serious study of the benefits of Christianity, which had abolished slavery and liberated women. However, she could not pursue such a study until "you become more calm, less agitated by the tumult that surrounds you..."⁷⁷

XI - SNARES AND DELUSIONS

There was somebody else keeping a fatherly eye on Louise as well — M. Andrieux, the police prefect. As we've already seen, Louise was becoming ruinously expensive to his budget, for it took several fulltime spies a day to keep her under surveillance.

But then M. Andrieux had a brilliant idea: the way to keep close watch on anarchist circles was to offer them their own newspaper. He explained all this with a certain cynical elegance in his memoirs: "My purpose was certainly to combat their propaganda, but I did at least provide them with a forum for their doctrines, so I've really no cause to shrink modestly from their gratitude and recognition any longer."¹

The anarchists were indeed looking for someone to bankroll a paper for them. M. Andrieux, therefore, hastened to meet their needs, sending them a "well-dressed bourgeois" (the dandy in his smart grey gloves knew full well that clothes make the man) who told them that he had made a fortune in the pharmaceutical business and now wished to dedicate part of his earnings to socialist propaganda. This "bourgeois plum ripe for the picking"² (to quote M. Andrieux) presented himself as a M. Serreaux. He was, in fact, a Belgian physician's son named Egide Spilleux, a.k.a. Serreaux, a.k.a. Genlis (aliases are a requirement of the trade). He arranged to have himself recommended to the Parisian anarchists by a M. Crié, a professor in Brussels and a "comrade." The trap was a work of art, every detail in place: when M. Serreaux applied to the chief

of the second press office of the police prefecture for permission to found a paper, he was refused on the grounds of being a foreigner. And so it was that Victor Ricois, another "comrade" — a real one this time (or so we trust) — became owner-manager of the paper,³ *La Révolution sociale*.

However, with M. Serreaux as pipeline, M. Andrieux sat in on every editorial conference. ("It was like installing a telephone line right to the conspirators' meeting-room."⁴)

The new weekly (for "my generosity didn't extend to funding a daily," explains Andrieux⁵) made its debut on September 12, 1880. The paper's objectives were as laudable as its name: "The revolutionary party must organize on its own grounds, with its own weapons, borrowing nothing from its enemies' arsenal of institutions, sophistries and methods of operation." And, when the heroic days came once again, the party must assault the State and demolish the fortress of privilege so thoroughly that not one stone was left standing on another. The watchword must be: "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs."⁶

Louise, naturally, was delighted with the new paper. She had been leaning toward anarchism ever since her years in New Caledonia, even though she firmly refused to join any one faction: the Social Revolution was a totality and she stood for that totality. "I stand with everyone who takes a step forward, but I belong to no particular group. I make my way, calm, cold, wrapped in the icy breath of the north wind, feeling neither hatred nor pity for the men and the things that delay the Revolution. They are nothing but obstacles, and they must be removed."⁷ When M. Serreaux suggested that she co-operate with *La Révolution sociale*, she accepted with joy, even though her decision displeased the collectivists.⁸

From then on, Louise worked very actively with M. Andrieux's paper. On the eve of the elections, Louise and Paule Minck were asked their opinions of the dead candidates and the illegal, if living, ones.* Louise answered through *La Révolution sociale*. "The dead candidates are both a rallying-banner and a call for justice. They are the pure abstract idea of the Social Revolution, the Idea itself, shorn of all individual personality,

* each type of nomination an equally clear symbolic gesture, whether of dead men whose political stance was clear or of living women who had no legal right to be candidates at all — *transl. note*

the idea, as invincible and relentless as death itself..." The illegal candidates, the women, also stood for a just claim to society: "That of the slavery of motherhood, for mothers are the ones who make of men what they are." Women, therefore, were included in the larger slavery and must join the struggle against it. Speaking personally, however, she did not wish to devote herself to this one special interest, for she supported "every group that makes its attack on the cursed edifice of the old society, whether with pickaxe, explosion or fire."⁹ Louise had been nominated in four different arrondissements — the eleventh, the eighteenth, the nineteenth and the twentieth. Again she responded through a newspaper article. While she could hardly oppose female candidacies, women must not divorce their cause from that of humanity as a whole. They must join "the great revolutionary army: we are combatants, not candidates." Moreover, electing women to public office would make no real change in society. Let all those who still believed in universal suffrage nominate working-class candidates; let the rest proclaim the Social Revolution. Her own choice was to ask her friends not to present her name.¹⁰

La Révolution sociale was once again the vehicle for her response to M. Fayet¹¹ and the assorted calumnies of the bourgeois press. Quite true, she had written religious poetry in her childhood, but even then she was "red" and in mourning for the Republic. (But there was that poem begging clemency for Orsini, with its prayers for Napoleon III and his dynasty...) "Yes, I was brought up in the countryside and I believed in God, but his earthly representatives disgusted me, and experience and reason convinced me of his non-existence." Enough nostalgia: the need now was to fight society. She dismissed the goal of universal suffrage once again: "Don't try to pretend that the vote is a sufficient weapon against your frauds and your crimes." Thus, logically, she denounced worker participation in bourgeois institutions. "The fewer of our people to be found in that Augean Stable known as Government, the freer we shall feel and the harder we shall work to awaken the people."¹²

Louise worked just as hard through *La Révolution sociale* as she did in public meetings to tear down the old society. She could see it crumbling, rotting, disintegrating: "Misery gnaws at the base, corruption nibbles the summit." And she saw a new world on the horizon, one where equality would replace

privilege, human responsibility would replace "the empty shell of heavenly reward." The "old she-wolf" (always wolves) could not survive without crime and human blood. Only the Social Revolution could sweep all that away and bring man his true salvation; only then would man be able to satisfy his hunger "for bread and science." The aged would have a shelter in which to die, and children would grow up undefiled.¹³

And only anarchism could bring all this about. Anarchism was neither monster nor hydra; it was "a political system under which society will be able to dispense with established government and become truly self-governing."

Then she wrapped herself once again in her Delphic robes. Praise to the Russian nihilists! "Nihilists, my brothers, you are avenged. Liberty soars above your gallows. Russia, we salute you!" And bravo for the Boers! And bravo, too, for the Irish peasants! "O, our red banners...flaming in the sun of this new spring! Today you fly freely only above our graves, soon you shall fly over the entire world."¹⁴ Such was the style, and such was the faith. She called on army conscripts to strike: whatever the regime, "Badinguet III or Opportunist I,*" the worker's daughter goes to the brothels, his son to the slaughter, and he himself finally dies of hunger like an old, abandoned workhorse. The winds are set for war: "My conscience cries out: let the conscripts strike!"¹⁵

She launched a frontal attack on the police prefect himself, who must have spread the paper on his office desk with a sleek and carnivorous smile. All the sleeker, in that he could enjoy an extra, private joke: Louise had simply titled her article, "To M. Andrieux," but his agents had turned it into something much more inflammatory, "Silence in the Face of Infamy." Louise wrote: "The renegade Andrieux...claims that he had my companions and me returned to this country so as to have us under his hangman's paw... Does he think the French will endure what the moujiks so proudly refused?" And she closed with what was, in effect, a call to murder: "Since, within the established order, he is untouchable, let those who are independent of that order effect their own justice."¹⁶

M. Andrieux wasn't content with running an anarchist

* "Badinguet" was a nickname for Napoleon III, dating from 1846 when he escaped from Ham in the clothes of a workman by that name; Gambetta, of course, was the great "Opportunist" — *transl. note*

newspaper. He turned his hand to political activism as well, according to his memoirs,¹⁷ where (better late than never) he claimed responsibility for organizing the attack on the statue of M. Thiers in Saint-Germain on the night of June 15, 1881. At the time, however, it was the executive committee of *La Révolution sociale* which took the credit: "This is only the prelude to other, more effective actions which no amount of police work will be able to prevent."¹⁸ Louise was delighted that the statue of "Foutriquet"* had taken such a beating. Her obsession with Asterix came surging back: "Vercingetorix told the Gauls, 'United, the whole world cannot withstand us...' We have the numbers and the justification, let us act... The whole world is with us; we shall bring the Revolution sweeping in like an avalanche."¹⁹

Andrieux must have rubbed his hands in glee. If this Louise Michel hadn't existed, he would have had to invent her. Her invective and her prophecies were enough to discredit all the revolutionary groups quite indiscriminately. "Mlle Louise Michel was the star of my paper, though, naturally, quite unaware of the role we had assigned her. I blush slightly to acknowledge the trap we thereby laid for the innocent."²⁰ The police prefect had good cause to be so pleased with his *Révolution sociale*, for it was meeting exactly the objectives he had laid out for it. It practised "la politique du pire," it thundered against even the most moderate electoral candidates, it brought the prefect's personal enemies into disrepute and generally rendered him a host of valuable, if minor, other services as well.²¹

Non-anarchist circles, however, didn't trust *La Révolution sociale*. With good cause, they suspected it of being a Trojan horse.²² Nasty rumours, to which Louise closed her ears, were circulating about the true identity of "M. Serreaux." And when Serreaux was finally unmasked, the ever-indulgent Louise wrote Jules Guesde a letter that sought both to excuse the *agent provocateur* and to exonerate herself and her comrades in the eyes of the other revolutionary parties. "Dear citizen Guesde, I count on your sense of justice and your friendship to see that the following statement is published. When all is said and done, I look upon Serreaux as an unfortunate being whose

* a less than polite bit of slang meaning (bowdlerized version) "shrimp" or "squirt," an under-sized person — *transl. note*

brain is partially non-functioning and who, therefore, is more to be condemned for folly than for espionage. And even were he guilty of the latter, the rest of us are not to be held responsible for it." She and her friends had always insisted that they were responsible only for the articles which each, individually, had signed. It was therefore unjust to accuse them of complicity: crime, like error, is individual.²³ Enough said.²⁴

Louise subsequently analyzed this whole episode in her *Mémoires*, but she was too honest and too naive to grasp either the subtleties of those police machinations or the damage that had been wrought by the demagoguery. M. Andrieux had been "stupid enough to try and destroy us by founding a newspaper which in fact destroyed him along with everything else. It was a very strange way for an intelligent man to choose to do battle."²⁵

But enough of these sordid intrigues. Louise carried on her discipleship, always under the watchful eye of the police, giving lectures whose proceeds were to go to amnestied Communards in need. She wanted to set up a soup kitchen where they could receive one free meal a day and, along with some other women, scoured Paris trying to find them acceptable lodgings.²⁶ Since the bourgeois press seemed so fascinated with her God-fearing poetry, she looked for ways to turn that situation to the financial advantage of her present interests. She therefore suggested to the reactionary papers that they pay her twenty francs a page for her poetry or for one half-hour interview. Was she mocking them? Undoubtedly. "It will give them a full week's-worth of slander to print. But he who laughs last laughs best."²⁷ *Le Gaulois* accepted her offer and handed over twenty francs for some poetry plus forty francs for a one-hour interview. That meant sixty francs for the amnestied Communards.²⁸

"How do you think this Revolution of yours is going to take place?" asked the eminently respectable journalist. "Through a general collapse, which will be triggered by some dreadful catastrophe like Sedan. I wouldn't want our friends to stave off such a catastrophe and thereby delay the fall of the old society." "So you are systematically an anarchist?" he continued. "The internal rivalries aren't important. I think that each of the 'tendencies' will provide one of the stages through which society must pass: socialism, communism, anarchism. Socialism will bring about justice and humanize it; communism

will refine the new state and anarchism will be its culmination. In anarchism, each being will achieve his own fullest development. Perhaps [shades of old Fourier] new directions will be found. Man, because he will no longer be hungry or cold, will be good. Therefore, we'll have no more need for laws, police or governments." "And that's your ultimate ideal?" "No, as we achieve those goals we shall see new ones beckoning in the distance. Human energies will be devoted to science. Nature will be harnessed..."²⁹

Her imagination knew no limits. She dreamed of founding a vocational school, to be known as L'Ecole de Mai, where there would be "no God nor master" and where only workers could be professors. "Don't be afraid to ride roughshod over the laws of the bourgeoisie."³⁰ The students of May '68 were a timid bunch, compared to Louise Michel. She rejected any co-operation whatsoever with bourgeois thought, bourgeois education, bourgeois codes and bourgeois politics. She was perfectly consistent, therefore, when she declined the request from the government of that bourgeois Republic to testify during its investigation into New Caledonian disciplinary procedures. How could she offer even the slightest co-operation, when M. de Galliffet still dined at the Elysée, when M. Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire was a government minister, when Maxime du Camp sat in the French Academy, when Cipriani was in exile? "I shall wait for the larger justice, and its hour is coming."³¹

Flanked by her female "general staff" (Paule Minck and Léonie Rouzade; Nathalie Lemel remained distinctly aloof), accompanied by comrade Girault, the collectivist Juels Guesde, sometimes Vallès, Louise was running from lecture to meeting and meeting to lecture. One day, January 23, she even allowed herself to be triple-booked: at the same time on the same day, crowds sat waiting for her in Puteaux, Belleville and Grenelle.³² She often arrived an hour late...or not at all. In Charenton, the waiting crowd at first amused itself by singing:

C'est la mère Michel

*Qui a perdu son chat...**

and then began shouting for a refund.³³ On that particular

* not composed in Louise's honour! There are many different versions of this pre-Revolutionary song, all of which, say the instructions, are to be sung "quickly and mischievously" — *transl. note*

occasion, Louise had a good excuse: Marianne was gravely ill and Louise had therefore posted a letter of regrets, but it did not arrive in time.³⁴

By now, Marianne had left her peaceful home in Conches to live with her daughter at 36 Rue Palonceau. Her sturdy peasant common sense was appalled by all the activity, the meetings, the praise and the insults which now filled her daughter's life. "Really!" she protested. "You've become their pet exotic animal on the end of the leash, and they're making you dance to amuse the crowds." "That's right," replied Louise. "I'll go and I'll dance and they'll pour money into my hand and then some of the hungry will have a meal."³⁵

There were tempestuous scenes between the two women. "If Louise won't stay home and care for me, I'll leave here and go to the hospice," Marianne grumbled to Marie Ferré, who promptly offered to care for the old woman herself.³⁶

It wasn't going to change. Despite her very real affection for her mother, Louise had become and would remain a prisoner of her public image. She was the incarnation of the Social Revolution, and her fame crossed national boundaries. Rue Palonceau became an international revolutionary rallying-point. Russian nihilists came to see her.³⁷ Refugee communists in New York sent her a contribution for the amnestied Communards.³⁸ The brothers and sisters of the Icarian Community (Iowa, U.S.A.) sent her their greetings "across the Atlantic" and asked that she contribute to their newspaper, *The Libertarian Commune*.³⁹ Louise became an international problem. His Excellency the Italian Ambassador greatly feared that she headed a clandestine group which was plotting to overthrow the Italian government. "I wouldn't be surprised," replied the police prefect, "though, to date, she does not seem to have concerned herself very much with foreign politics."⁴⁰

In April, Louise and Emile Gautier inaugurated a speaking tour of the provinces in the city of Amiens, where Louise was received with great enthusiasm by a crowd of 1500 people.⁴¹ Then to Saint-Etienne on May 23⁴² and to the Croix-Rousse district of Lyon on May 24,⁴³ where she reminded her audience of the slogan of that city's silkweavers: "Live working or die fighting." At first, her bourgeois appearance would startle her audiences but, as she spoke, they discovered "the revolutionary conviction, fanaticism even, shining in her strange gaze." She talked about the events of the day, about "meddling" and

interference in Tunisia.⁴⁴ She returned briefly to Paris, made a quick stop in Troyes and set out again, this time for Béziers, Sète and Montpellier.⁴⁵ People flocked to her lectures. The police managed to lay their hands on her notebook and found in it the addresses of various militant anarchists: Langlère, a Narbonne tailor, Marty, a Béziers bookstore clerk, and more, of the same ilk.⁴⁶ Louise unsuspectingly went her way.

In July she travelled to London for the international anarchist Congress* which was being chaired by Edwin Dun and Prince Kropotkin. There were delegates from Spain, Italy, Germany and Austria; the French delegation included Louise Michel, Pouget, Martin (from Vienne) called "The Hunchback" and, naturally, M. Andrieux's personal representative, the inevitable Serreaux. Louise was greeted with great warmth, and spoke with great violence — enough violence to provoke questions in the House by angry Conservatives.⁴⁷ The Congress recognized the validity of propaganda by deed and resolved to open a permanent Correspondence Bureau (which, in fact, never opened).⁴⁸

Despite all this activity, Louise, faithful to her cult of the dead, found time to attend the transfer of Ferré's remains to the Levallois-Perret cemetery.⁴⁹

One day the walls of Paris were plastered with a huge mauve poster, entitled, "The Candidacy of Louise Michel." It was a clumsy sort of practical joke, but Louise was furious with the unknown "opportunist."⁵⁰ The round of meetings continued. She had once defended the "Kanakas" against the French administration; now she very consistently denounced French intervention in Tunisia. The French would rise in protest, she predicted, "they don't want to be sent to die in Africa... This war in Tunisia is the stream of blood which will cause the whole river to overflow..."⁵¹

Louise and Marianne had now moved from Rue Palonceau to 117 Boul. d'Ornano.⁵² M. Andrieux's attentions continued and two agents took what seemed to be permanent seats in nearby wine shops.⁵³ The police also checked into her financial affairs. Marianne had a small income of 4-500 francs a month; Louise earned a bit of money with her articles for *La Révolution sociale* (about which M. Andrieux was well-informed) and for *La Libre Pensée*. She also received money from Rochefort,

* the "Black International" Congress of 1881 — *transl. note*

Clemenceau, an aristocratic old descendant of the Condé, one of the Castelnau and the Marquise de la Bourdonnaye. Her lectures brought in very little, sometimes nothing at all.⁵⁴ She bitterly protested the claim by *L'Événement* that she earned 800 francs a month from her conferences.⁵⁵ She was always surrounded by supplicants, wanting something, exploiting her good nature. Marianne wept at the letters of insult that followed the letters requesting money, "when we haven't even a *sou* in the house."⁵⁶

The anniversary of Blanqui's death (January 8, 1882) finally gave the police prefect his excuse to arrest Louise Michel, plus some of the comrades who had gone with her to Père-Lachaise. Perhaps they would be able to intimidate her a little? They took her first to the central police station and then to the court of summary justice.* It was child's play, for someone who had been before the Councils of War...

Said the judge: "You are charged with insulting police officers." Said Louise, in her slow, measured voice: "We are the ones who should be entering charges of brutality and insult, for *we* were very calm. When I arrived in the central station, however, I saw some agents beating a man violently. *They* were very excited. I went up one floor and found two other agents, much calmer ones, to whom I said, 'Hurry! They're murdering a man downstairs!'" Said the judge: "Your testimony is at variance with that of the witnesses." Said Louise: "I have spoken the truth."

And then, in an implicit reference to her appearance before the Council of War, she added insolently, "I have already claimed responsibility for much more serious things than 'insulting a police officer.'" Officer Conar testified that she had indeed called the agents "murderers" and "lay-about." "That's not true," replied Louise (the specific word "lay-about" not being part of her vocabulary). "It is true," snapped the officer.

Since the word of a police agent weighs more heavily in the scales of justice than that of a revolutionary, Louise Michel, under the provisions of article 224 of the Penal Code, was sentenced to 15 days in Saint-Lazare prison.⁵⁷

She was really very comfortable in Saint-Lazare, and was even allowed to receive visitors. One of the editors of *Le*

* roughly, magistrate's court — *transl. note*

Voltaire, prudently accompanied by the director of the prison, came to interview her. Louise was cautious, for she did not wish to risk compromising her friends, but she did take the opportunity to attack Gambetta and the Opportunists once again.

"You're hopelessly divided amongst yourselves," the editor said. "You call Clemenceau a reactionary, the collectivists don't trust the radicals, and on and on it goes." "We are still very far from our goal," replied Louise, "but circumstances will come to our assistance... And anyway, none of us have the temperament to govern. We destroy. Others will come along to build things up again."⁵⁸

A great blow greeted her upon her release from prison. Marie Ferré was dead. She was buried wrapped in a red shawl.⁵⁹ Funeral services played a large role in Louise Michel's life and, once again, she made a funeral oration over the grave of a dear friend: "Marie Ferré combined the gentleness of a woman with the energy of a man. It is the assassination of her brother which unites us today around this grave. We do not forget that we are saying our farewells to one of the defeated, one of the victims..." But Marie Ferré would be an example to all revolutionary women. "And, when the moment comes, we shall be there. Farewell, Marie Ferré! Long live the Revolution!"⁶⁰

Louise wrote an elegy for Marie, just as she had for her Demahis grandparents:

*Mes amis, puisqu'il faut nous dire qu'elle est morte,
Qu'au seuil de nos prisons, nous ne la verrons plus;
Puisque du froid néant nul ne rouvre la porte,
Que vers les trépassés nos cris sont superflus,
Parlons d'elle un instant; que son nom nous reporte
Vers ceux que nous avons perdus.*

Marie had been modest, dignified and brave. Thinking of Marie made Louise think of Théophile as well:

*...et mon coeur sous sa pierre,
Se sent enseveli vivant.*

But, following the customary evolution of her poems, Louise pulls herself together at the end:

*O Révolution, mère qui nous dévore
Et que nous adorons, suprême égalité,
Prends nos destins brisés pour en faire une aurore.
Que sur nos morts chéris, plane la liberté.*⁶¹

And she asked the sculptor, Grévin, to make a bust of Marie.⁶²

One after another, the Commune and deportation survivors were dying. Malezieux, Trinquet... Louise spoke at every graveside.⁶³

She did not attend another public meeting until March 18, when she again demonstrated her remarkable gift for being in a number of places at once. She attended a punch held by the Solidarity Society of the Proscribed, where she spoke of the significance of the Commune: it had sought to proclaim liberty for the entire world, not just for France. But now? She told her audience that "they" had left the people some crumbs of liberty, they toyed with a few anticlerical decrees, but in reality the clergy was stronger than ever and the worker and his family still died of hunger. The red flag was no longer appropriate; they should raise the black flag of misery.⁶⁴ Then she spoke at an anarchist banquet in Montmartre,⁶⁵ before rushing off to yet another engagement in Salle Amadiers: "The time will come for us to join together, avenge our dead of 1871, and win our liberty."⁶⁶ Then it was the turn of the Blanquists, Salle Favié: "Soon we shall have a new March 18, and that one will usher in the true republic, the people's republic."⁶⁷ Finally, near midnight, she arrived in Levallois-Perret, near the cemetery which now held the bones of both Théophile and Marie Ferré. "Let us weep for the members of revolutionary socialism, killed, murdered, in 1871, who now rest in peace..."⁶⁸

And even then, Louise had not managed to keep all her engagements for that March 18. She wrote a letter of apology to Jules Guesde: "Dear citizen Guesde, I tried very hard to visit every group on this anniversary of March 18. But even so, I had to leave for Levallois before I could visit Palais-Royal and afterwards, it was too late. To honour the memory of my dear Marie, I thus left out those friends whom I shall be able to see again..."⁶⁹ Even though anarchism was her personal preference, Louise always expressed, in her public action, the unity of the proletarian world.

But Louise was not a woman to live in the past, however much she might honour it. Suddenly there she was, amazing All-Paris with her new career of playwright. She had written two dramas, *Nadine* and *Le Bâtard Impérial*, in collaboration with the director of *Le Petit Figaro*, M. Jean Winter (known as Grippa de Winter). By M. Andrieux's standards, Winter was another unsavoury "individual." He already had a police dossier

to his name, and had been the secretary of the Latin Quarter committee for an Alfred de Musset festival.⁷⁰ The director of the Bouffes du Nord, which had agreed to stage Louise's drama, was even worse: *he* was Maxime Lisbonne, ex-colonel of the Commune, who had been first condemned to death and then deported instead to Ducos Peninsula, despite his crippling wounds.⁷¹

The censors ordered a few deletions and then on March 25, 1882 gave the play the required permit. M. Jules Ferry himself had intervened to see that Louise was given the greatest possible liberty.⁷² The play was a revolutionary melodrama, set in Cracow in 1846. The main characters (and there were a great many of them) were Bakunin; Herzen; the Prince; his daughter, the beautiful, pure and generous Nadine; the young male lead, Serge; and the inevitable traitor, the wicked countess Sophie. This play (which now lies filed away in the censorship archives⁷³) is, like all Louise Michel's literary creations, impossible to summarize. Many of Louise's pet obsessions made their appearance: wind, snow, blood, wolves, tyrannicide, and situations of high drama:

"I must kill your father [the Prince]," says Serge to Nadine.

"You cannot," says Nadine to Serge.

"I must," says Serge. "He betrayed my brothers, who were fighting openly. Now I must strike my benefactor in secret."

The play closes with the revolutionaries battling in the flaming city. The handsome Serge is dead. The last group of insurgents refuses to yield. Nadine dies in turn, but Bakunin and Herzen, surrounded by cadavers, survive. The prince, Nadine's father, weeps over his daughter's body. "Order reigns in Cracow," he says. Curtain. The parallels between the Polish insurrection and the Commune were obvious but, as we know, good intentions do not always guarantee good literature.

On April 29, Salles des Bouffes du Nord was jammed to the rafters. Parisian society filled the front rows — the people who, in Versailles, had insulted and abused the Communard prisoners — the dandies and their demoiselles, all the *beau monde* who had come for a good laugh. Then there were the journalists, including the loyal servants of M. Andrieux who, for the occasion, had been transformed into drama critics. On the other side sat the friends, the comrades: Rochefort and his sons,

Richepin, many more. A man named Sarcey was sandwiched between the two camps. He really was a drama critic, and he would have liked to hear the play. He even tried calling for silence, but in vain.

Honorat and Grillières, M. Andrieux's "critics," saw it this way: "9:35, first scene. A Polish revolt. Lots of shooting. Closes with a battle between the Poles and Russians. Laughter in the orchestra seats. Applause in the upper galleries... 10:45, fourth scene. Conspiracy down in the mines. So much laughter and joking around me I couldn't hear a word... 11:35, fifth scene. Begins with a military march. Long delay in raising curtain because of the noise. People are throwing things at the stage and laughing fit to kill... Sixth scene. The most incredibly complicated intrigues. Traitors everywhere you look and not a single word can be made out. Now everybody is laughing, galleries as well as orchestra. Too many flares... 12:50, seventh and last scene. Greater uproar than ever..."⁷⁴

While all this was going on, a reporter for *Le Jour* had slipped into the wings. From there, he could hear the cries, catcalls, and the whistling rising from the orchestra, while defiant applause rained down from the gallery amid shouts of "Long live the Republic!" Under a gas-jet sat an old woman dressed in black, knitting: Louise Michel. Her only concern was for the actors "who are being wantonly insulted and humiliated." At that moment, an actor was speaking of honour, independence and the homeland. "These words were greeted by the hoots and foot-stamping of the gentlemen and the shrill, vacuous laughter of their lady-friends."⁷⁵

Despite this cabal, the play was a success on the following days. Lisbonne would have been perfectly content with the whole affair, if only Louise could resist sending him "every last beggar" from the deportation, clutching a credit note for 20 or 30 francs to be drawn from her royalties. "She'd devour my theatre and all my actors as well."⁷⁶ From June 6 on, Louise made a speech about the play before the curtain rose for each performance. She told the audience that she was there to speak strictly of literary matters. Any success that *Nadine* might have was due entirely to the tenacity of the actors, certainly not to the newspapers. "Our goal was to remind today's younger generation of Bakunin." But the censors had insisted on the deletion of the first two acts. "Everything I say or do is watched, reported, twisted..." She continued, "I have been criticized for

allowing Countess Sophie, the personification of evil, to survive. But Evil *does* survive. The agony of our society is that its people are weary, too worn-out to fight for their dreams. But other generations will come, who can fight, and will triumph. However, I must stop: censorship, wearing a different hat, is here with us.”⁷⁷ For she had noted the presence of Grillières, Andrieux’s drama critic and informer. (He must have been an educated man, all the same, for one of his chosen pseudonyms was Catullus.⁷⁸)

Louise then left the Bouffes du Nord theatre for her more customary *tragedia dell’arte* of public meetings, where the script was written anew every night. She consistently refused to chair these meetings, since she refused to recognize presidencies of any sort.⁷⁹ But she would always speak, blithely continuing her attacks on government and trying to help organize a federation of the different revolutionary groups.⁸⁰ She was the great travelling salesman of the Revolution and, by now, she was convinced that the next advances for the cause would be made in the rural areas, not the city. “There’s something leaden about the very atmosphere in Paris. We breathe it in, and it kills us.”⁸¹

And so we find her next in Marseille, accompanied by Digeon and Rouanet, where she spoke to the women of the Free Thought Group, to the bakery-workers’ union, to the Esquiros Circle and to an audience of French, Italian and Spanish workers in the Théâtre des Nations. The editor of *Le Petit Provençal* was amazed by the unaffected, entirely respectable demeanour of this redoubtable woman who had such notoriety in Paris. Louise appealed to women to throw themselves into the Revolution: “No more girls for prostitution, no more boys for the army... Away with the clandestine International; I’m calling you to the open, living, vibrant International!”⁸²

She spoke in Montpellier, where at least “the Bonapartists and the *légitimistes* had the good taste to object to the hyperbole and the utopian fantasies of Mlle Louise Michel,” as the (republican) prefect of L’Hérault wrote to the (no less republican) minister of the Interior.⁸³

On July 1, she spoke in Salle Alcazar, in Lyon: “I salute revolutionary Lyon and the martyrs of Democracy. From now on, we shall march no longer with the red flag, but [brandishing the black flag of anarchism] with this flag of mourning... The old world, this bourgeois aristocracy which has managed to hang on to all the privileges of the earlier aristocracy of the nobility... will disappear, making way for a new society.”⁸⁴ This speech was no

more violent than usual, but the word circulated that the government had had enough, that charges would be laid.⁸⁵ *Le Temps* thought this highly unlikely, but *L'Intransigeant* took the rumour more seriously: "The Cabinet has long contemplated cracking down on the freedom of speech."⁸⁶ The benevolent government let them have their say.

Narbonne, on July 6.⁸⁷ Perpignan on July 8, where Louise was a great success. Her slow, heavy, cadenced voice seemed to echo humanity's own pain. "There are strong elements of the visionary and the prophet in this woman," wrote one journalist.⁸⁸

Louise returned to Paris well-satisfied with her tour and more firmly convinced than ever that the rural areas were now the outstanding example of the union of all revolutionary forces. "We can still catch up. We must organize our groups, create our federation, so that we shall be ready for the great Revolution when it comes." She protested the "low blow" which the French and the English were preparing for Tunisia and Egypt. Who had started this war? The people? No. The workers? No. "It was the bourgeoisie, the capitalists, who'll arrange for the slaughter of Frenchmen and Egyptians both, just to turn an extra few million francs in profit... When will people finally understand that the great purpose of their lives is not to be cannon-fodder, but to live together in brotherhood?"⁸⁹

On July 30, along with the Marxists Guesde and Lafargue, she spoke out once again in opposition to the Egyptian expedition: revolutionary parties, unite; revolutionary women, unite; overturn the old world through world-wide revolution. Then we shall see what comes next.⁹⁰

On August 8 Louise announced the constitution of The League of Women: "We wish to inform women of their rights and their duties; we want men to view their companions as equals, not as slaves." Louise insisted, quite against historical fact, that the Revolution of 1789 had laid the basis for female emancipation and that the Revolution of 1871 had continued the good work.⁹¹ Women everywhere must join the fight against war and prostitution. They must set up groups in every city, every village, but — true to the Commune's faith in decentralization and the independent spirit of anarchism — each group belonging to the League would still be autonomous. The goal was held in common, but the means to the goal might vary: some groups might reject violence, others embrace violence and every

other possible revolutionary tactic. Louise personally sided with the latter approach: she handled the paperwork for groups that espoused violence, and offered her home for their twice-monthly meetings.⁹²

On August 27, in Salle Lévis, she declared that the League now had members in Warsaw, Rome, Spain and England — how much did her dreams influence this statement of “fact”? — and that a women’s strike was in the organizational stages. (No, not the sort made famous in *Lysistrata*...⁹³) The appeal went out several days later, in the name of the League’s strike-action committee: “Those needleworkers who wish to strike should register at the home of Mme Aymard, 13 Rue Berzeliers, or of citizen Avronsart, 16 Place Maubet, or of Louise Michel, 117 Boul. Barbès.”* The book of children’s stories which Louise had written in New Caledonia, *La Bibliothèque rouge*, was put on sale, all proceeds to the strike fund.⁹⁴ In the end, it was the washerwomen, not the needleworkers, who acted first. They had met with their employers and demanded a one-hour reduction in the work day and a raise of five centimes per hour. One employer agreed, and Louise hoped the others would follow suit. If not, the washerwomen, backed by the seamstresses, would strike. Women had to receive equal pay for equal work, they had to receive living wages so that prostitution need no longer be a necessary sideline. “The hour of Revolution is near...” The League of Women had exactly 56 francs 30 centimes in its account, of which thirty francs had come from the publication of Louise’s novel, *L’Equarisseur* in *Le Clarion*. This money would go to the washerwomen, should they have to strike. That same evening, Louise launched another antiwar appeal, aimed at all those women who didn’t want their children to grow up with the choice of only two roles, “butcher or victim.”⁹⁵

Her public meetings were always lively affairs, suffering frequent interruption. People shouted, heckled, hissed. One night she snapped, “I am accustomed to speaking to human beings, not animals,” and one unrepentent voice called back, “What about your cat?”⁹⁶ Another time she was talking about prostitutes, when a male voice jeered, “There wouldn’t be any, if they all looked like you.”⁹⁷

Whenever she failed to turn up, the shouts and jeers were just that much louder. People demanded the return of their “ten

* formerly Ornano — author’s note

sous.”⁹⁸ Probably the rowdiest meeting of all took place in Versailles. She had returned to the revolutionary quarter of Montmartre, now she would return to Versailles, city of reaction and shame, psychological capital of the bourgeoisie. One day the good bourgeois were horrified to discover this very aggressive poster plastered on the walls of their most royal, most peaceful, Versailles:

GRAND MEETING
organized by the anarchist youth
with the participation of *LOUISE MICHEL*
Sunday, September 24.

Agenda:
THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION ⁹⁹

It was the whole package: anarchist youth, Louise Michel, and the Social Revolution. A frightening combination for those who still had vivid memories of the arrival of the Commune prisoners. Now they were coming again! In triumph, this time! It seems you couldn't kill enough to eradicate them once and for all!

So the bourgeoisie of Versailles turned out in full force on Sunday, September 24, Salle Flores — and very elegant they were, too — all gloves, silk hats and velvet, as if they'd just come from Mass.

Emile Gautier opened the meeting by declaring they had come to Versailles, the “Calvary and tomb of the Commune,” because they wished to win over a city “whose evil reputation is unfortunately well-deserved.”

“You're insulting our city!” cried the silk-and-velvet hats. “Versailles was the cradle of liberty in '89...” “What about the Tennis Court Oath?”* Gautier, unruffled, carried on, but the crowd began shouting for Louise Michel. Louise rose, in her customary flowing black of full mourning, and chanted her dreams: “War will end... The world will be one nation... Personal ambition will disappear, in the triumph of the human race as a whole...”

“It's easy to talk...” cried the silk hats. “Go tell that one to Berlin,” added the velvet hats.

* when Louis XVI summoned the Estates General to Versailles in 1789, the Third Estate refused to submit to the other two estates (nobility and clergy) and instead took its own “Tennis Court Oath,” so named for the site of the pledge, thereby declaring itself the National Assembly and setting the stage for revolution — *transl. note*

"You want to talk about Prussia? Fine. It was Sedan that gave birth to the Commune. We were as much patriots as socialists..."

Somebody demanded to know how they were going to bring about this fine Revolution of theirs, and Gautier replied: "First, we shall repossess capital, and put it at the disposition of all..." Now the uproar was complete. It abated somewhat when a self-styled "socialist" came to the podium to announce that "public happiness had only two sources, work and thrift." Louise continued: "Every revolution so far has been political, and inadequate. All these revolutions do is exchange one set of politicians for another. Our goal is different, we want a Social Revolution." The clamour broke out again, louder than ever. People shouted, "Our money! Our money!" It was not clear if they were demanding their money back, or simply pleading that their savings not be stolen from them...

When Louise finally left the hall, she was accompanied only by four boys and two old women, but a street mob soon began to grow. They were booed and jostled by the swelling crowd that now included soldiers and children as well. People shouted, "Send her to the hospital! To the morgue!" They sang, "C'est la mère Michel..." And, at the train station, they shouted, "Down with the Commune!" Terrified station employees scrambled to bar the doors and hurried Louise and the two old women into a reserved compartment. Chincholle and Claretie (the reporters who provided the account of the meeting used here) joined Louise, and tried to interview her. Louise shrugged, "Bah, one meeting is much like another... But our future is coming, it's certainly coming. Still, perhaps we should imitate the Russian nihilists and hurry it along a bit." She broke off, and looked out the window at a little girl who was standing far down the tracks, under a row of tall trees. "What a lovely sight," said Louise. "Whatever we may accomplish, we'll never rival nature..." Chincholle was staggered: was this really the same woman who'd been calling so violently for revolution? Claretie was equally startled, and bid Louise a respectful farewell at the Ville-d'Avray stop.¹⁰⁰

Rochefort came to Louise's defence in the pages of *L'Intransigeant*, and she appreciated it. "My dear comrade in the struggle, I must shake your hand for today's article. How could they possibly have thought that the shouts and jeers of a rag-tail mob could upset me, when Satory fills my heart...? All

that uproar is merely a sign that they are finished." And then, with her usual raffish delight in the absurd: "Anyway, it was a colourful flock. There was this lame beggar, obviously down to his last centime, vociferating furiously against those who would attack property. You know Callot's drawings of tramps and beggarmen? There he was, brought to life. And then there were the fine example of the retinue of Amphitrite [probably a particularly high-flown literary allusion to pimps] and a whole gaggle of street urchins, many of whom, I wouldn't doubt, are future insurgents. In short, we were treated to the whole range of human nonsense." And she was well pleased with the day's work. "That spectacle must have won some members of the audience to our side. Events can speak more eloquently than words."¹⁰¹

Since defeat always rankled with her and she loved battle, she was bound and determined to make a tour of Brittany. She'd convert the Chouans,* those hard and faithful men, the descendants and standardbearers for "Vercingetorix," those men for whom she felt such empathy and such admiration; she'd convert them even if they met her "swinging their pitchforks." "Someday, all that Breton stubbornness will attach itself to the truth," she said. "Then their fanaticism will serve the future instead of the past." She had dreamed of conquering Brittany "ever since January 22, 1871, when I stood in front of City Hall and watched those large blond men look out the windows and shoot us down, perfectly convinced of what they were doing, just the way Trochu planned it. Oh yes, They'll join us one day! The King's faithful band will finally join the proletariat and the Revolution."¹⁰² And, waiting for the day she could tackle the Chouans, Louise went on addressing the crowds in suburban Paris.¹⁰³

Whatever the police and the bourgeois press might say about her financial resources, Louise was always deep in debt. Her mother had taken seriously ill and Louise couldn't even pay the rent. The publisher Fayard — "who ruined everything she wrote" — owed her money that she awaited from day to day but, day to day, nothing came. And so, with Vaughan as intermediary, she asked Rochefort for an advance of 200 francs on her allowance of 500 francs. "Otherwise, I greatly fear that mother and I will be thrown out."¹⁰⁴ He paid immediately, and

* Breton Royalists — *transl. note*

“saved me from that terrible distress.”¹⁰⁵

With at least the rent question settled, Louise could take off for Brussels. The city’s “moderate” socialists were not overjoyed by the arrival of the “Belleville Virgin.”¹⁰⁶ *L’Etoile belge* had its Paris correspondent interview her. Everything in her face and bearing, said the resulting article, expressed “asceticism and sacrifice.” The journalist asked her if it was true that she had wanted to assassinate Napoleon III, Thiers and Gambetta. “The first two, yes,” she replied. “But it would be pointless to kill the third, since another just like him would spring up and take his place. The cause of the Revolution is not served by pointless murder... I believe in the Revolution,” she added, “as others believe in God...” The reporter then wanted to know what she would substitute for the present system. “I don’t worry about that very much... After the Revolution, the inspiration of the moment will produce some great and effective ideas for social renewal.”¹⁰⁷

Her first lecture in Brussels was to be held at the Cirque Royal. The director was waiting for her at the train station on October 22, but when a demonstration broke out upon her arrival, the police moved in and gave her an escort. She stayed, not at the Grand-Hôtel, but at the home of a humble jeweller, Henri Delsante, known for his anarchist opinions. The socialists took this badly.¹⁰⁸ All Brussels was at the Cirque Royal to jeer and heckle Louise as she tried to talk about the women’s strike. She promptly invited her hecklers to the podium.¹⁰⁹ Her two other lectures, one on workers and one on the Revolution, took place in the same sort of disorder. A man named Eugène Fallon (possibly Eugène Pignouf) accused Louise of having wanted to erect a statue to M. Thiers. “That’s stupid,” replied Louise, and the man was thrown out. One of the speakers accused the Brussels police “thugocracy” of inciting disorder. The shouting increased. Louise remained perfectly composed to the end.¹¹⁰ Her final meeting was attended by German and Austrian ministers, the secretary of the British ambassador, a representative from the French consulate — all the beautiful people, in a word. But Fallon (Pignouf?) turned up once again and the scene he provoked this time was even rowdier.¹¹¹ Louise took the midnight train back to Paris.

Brussels had not been very impressed. Parisians were a product of their own frivolous society and therefore very gullible. Belgians, however, were “down to earth” and “not easily

fooled." ¹¹²

Louise stayed in Paris long enough to attend another meeting and then, October 29, set off for Lille. Even though the striking spinners came out to support her, she had an even worse reception than in either Versailles or Brussels. "The victory of the Revolution..." began Louise, and her adversaries shouted, "Long live dynamite!" The meeting broke up in a general fistfight, right inside the hall. ¹¹³

Back to Paris. Another meeting. Republican socialists, even though they didn't share her ideas, defended her "against the reactionary opportunist boors" who attacked her in such cowardly fashion. ¹¹⁴ But Louise was already gone again, this time to Gand.

The students from the Catholic university of Louvain turned up *en masse*, armed with whistles (for noise) and red kidney beans (for projectiles). They derisively sang "La Mère Michel" while the socialists countered with "Ca Ira." "Down with the *pétroleuse*!" they cried, as Louise entered the room. Fists flew, they even smashed the furniture for extra weapons. A table-leg struck Louise on the head. "Cowards!" somebody cried. Louise calmly picked up the piece of wood: "It will make a fine souvenir of these thugs." Twenty police agents had to escort her to the train station, to protect her from the angry crowd. The burgomaster had closed the station gates, but fighting broke out in the buffet all the same. When the train finally pulled out, three young men spat upon her compartment. In Alost, a crowd shouted, "Scum! *Pétroleuse*! If you ever set foot in Alost, we'll string you up in the town square!" Others contented themselves with, "Let's kill her." ¹¹⁵

This was really too much, even for the bourgeois press. "Hideous, disgusting," wrote *La Belgique*, November 2. The government's reaction was to ban Louise Michel from making speeches in Belgium, "for her own safety." Belgian socialists protested the bourgeoisie's behaviour, but were in fact perfectly happy to see her banned from the country. ¹¹⁶ They may well have reached the conclusion that these uproars did the revolutionary cause more harm than good.

Back in Paris, she had to face charges that she preached the revolution for sheer financial gain. They said she had been paid 1500 francs for her lectures in Belgium. "For that kind of money, calls to Revolt are a good business proposition," commented *Le Voltaire*. Rochefort, who had reason to know better than anyone

else the perpetually hopeless state of Louise's finances, pointed out that *L'Intransigeant* had received from her 100 francs for the 1871 exiles, 100 francs for the miners of Borinage, 100 francs for the Anvers socialist press, 300 for those awaiting trial in Châlon, and the rest for the support of a variety of revolutionary propaganda activities.¹¹⁷ Louise herself wrote to Jules Guesde that she was now on her way to the Netherlands, and that the proceeds from this engagement would be used to keep her promises to the workers of Montceau-les-Mines and to the 1871 proscripts (the soup kitchen scheme) and second, to provide herself with rent money for the next six months.¹¹⁸

But first, a few more meetings in Paris: to defend the strikers in Saint-Antoine, to attack the conduct of the trials in Montceau-les-Mines, to support Girault, "suffering martyrdom in prison," and to attack the construction of Sacre-Coeur, "an insult to our consciences."¹¹⁹ Then she left for Amsterdam.¹²⁰

The Amsterdam bourgeoisie went to see her "as if she were some new species of tiger, just arrived at the Zoo." She spoke about women's rights, and disappointed the crowd somewhat with the monotony of her voice and the moderation of her words. One paper jeered that she was "a schoolmistress" who'd stripped "to draw the crowds with her old Communard skin."¹²¹ She fell flat in The Hague. First, she was fifteen minutes late, which annoyed her punctual audience. And second, "the bitter Michel"* was a bore. Some students, who had come all the way from Leyde and Delft for this very purpose, began to whistle. A man cried out to them in French, "You are without honour. Only cowards insult women." People laughed. The curtain fell.¹²²

The Dutch anarchist, Domela Nieuwenhuis, interviewed Louise in the town square. She explained that the price of admission for her talk had been quite steep because she wanted to transfer some money from these bourgeois to the French workers. Nieuwenhuis took her to a workers' meeting. "I spoke for the comrades." She talked about the poor, the dispossessed, and made an "unforgettable" impression on the Dutch workers. Her state of exaltation was almost unhealthy, wrote Nieuwenhuis, but "her illness is much healthier than the health of most people." He was later to name his daughter Louise.¹²³

Louise always remembered this trip with pleasure: a country where peasants had libraries and meeting-halls, and met

* a pun on the song title ("L'amère Michel"... "La Mère Michel") — *transl. note*

to discuss women's rights and parliamentary behaviour. And "those big women with calm faces and golden caps," as beautiful as the Rubens paintings which she had seen in the Amsterdam museum. "Will I ever go there again?"¹²⁴

Back to Paris. She attended a play by Victor Hugo, was recognized and booed. "The minister of the Interior, who attended the same performance, strongly criticized this unseemly conduct."¹²⁵

More meetings and lectures. She began to lose track of them herself, and once wrote Jules Guesde: "Is there a meeting tonight? It seems to me that I've promised to go somewhere."¹²⁶ She and Guesde went to Roubaix for a meeting, which ended in pandemonium and brutal police intervention.¹²⁷ On December 23, the miners in Montceau-les-Mines were convicted of anarchist activities and Prince Kropotkin and Emile Gautier, as part of a general sweep, were under detention. Louise said once again that she belonged to all revolutionary groups — her shared meeting with Jules Guesde was the proof — but that right now anarchists were the most embattled and so she must declare herself more than ever an anarchist.¹²⁸ What did theory and methodology matter? The Revolution was the point. And not just in France, but world-wide. "All exploiters everywhere must disappear."¹²⁹ Then on January 7, 1883, Louise set off again, this time for London.¹³⁰

True to her Robin Hood approach, Louise made sure that the price of admission to Steinway Hall was high. But with that money, like Perrette,* Louise could finally establish her soup-kitchen in Paris. Furthermore, workers were able to attend this speech on women's rights¹³¹ free of charge.¹³² But she was a bigger hit addressing the Poland Street Club and a group of German socialists. She denounced the grand trial of anarchists which was then underway in Lyon, claiming that she was equally "guilty" and that she, too, should have had her place among the accused. While she did manage to raise some money for the families of the accused,¹³³ her London visit really didn't arouse much indignation, enthusiasm or even curiosity. She cut it short, returning to Paris on January 15.¹³⁴

Industrialists in the north of France were uneasy about this trip of hers. They were afraid that the English were plotting to

* the daydreaming milkmaid in La Fontaine's fable, *La Laitière et le pot au lait*
— transl. note

use Louise Michel to foment strikes in their region and thus cripple French industry and commerce.¹³⁵ Louise, however, rode straight through the north and directly back to Paris. She paused long enough to join Jules Guesde at a meeting protesting the conviction of the Lyon anarchists¹³⁶ and then left for Lyon itself. The meeting she attended there opened with the decision to name Prince Kropotkin (who was on trial) its honorary chairman. "In Lyon," she said, "anarchists sit on the defendant's bench in court. In England, they sit on the members' benches in the House of Commons." The meeting, by voice vote, carried a motion to call for armed struggle against the bourgeoisie. Louise, however, denounced the anonymous letters which some partisans had been sending the judges in the trial: "I want open struggle. Anonymous letters disgust me."¹³⁷

Every meeting she attended in Paris upon her return from Lyon heard her call on the revolutionary groups to take to the streets.¹³⁸

She also had to take the time to defend herself against a sudden barrage of innuendo. She only made speeches for the money, they whispered; she'd had a child out there in New Caledonia... "I've never had a child," she snapped, "and the anonymous muckrakers who write this sort of thing are pretty stupid not to realize I can back my claim. All the other deportees are my witnesses, so is the administration in Noumea." But it was much easier to hobble her with attacks of this sort than to put her in prison along with her friends in Lyon. "Those people who ask me at meetings why I am not in prison now know that the enemy prefers slander."¹³⁹

Here I must break into the narrative. It was quite ridiculous to accuse Louise Michel of having had a baby in New Caledonia; that sort of thing could never have been hushed up. However, a long time ago — a long time before I ever thought of writing this biography — I received a strange telephone call. The woman at the other end of the line asked me if I thought it possible that Louise Michel had had a daughter because, according to family legend, she herself was supposed to be the granddaughter of that putative child. I humoured her, thinking her another of those maniacs who claim to be the direct descendants of Jesus Christ, Joan of Arc or Louise XVII. Now I wish I had paid more attention, for I've never been able to find that woman again and there are indeed many gaps in the accounts of Louise Michel's life (notably her 1853 stay in Paris), which her own *Mémoires* do

nothing to fill. But let's not indulge in myth-making of our own!

March 4, another trip to Lyon. When she came back, the Syndicat des Menuisiers called on the unemployed to join a huge demonstration on the Esplanade des Invalides. The demonstration was set for March 9.¹⁴⁰

XII - WORK OR BREAD!

The collectivists* were not in favour of this demonstration. The radical left hardly more so, for it feared that the extreme left and extreme right might between them put the very existence of the Republic in danger. The royalist paper, *Le Gaulois*, adopted a pious tone: "The workers have been waiting ten years now for social reform under this Republic. They would seem to be entitled to present their case from time to time..."¹

Ten o'clock. All was quiet on the Esplanade des Invalides. A few workers stood about, looking at the cannons, or Napoleon's tomb in the chapel. A few police agents were also about, no more. But there were a great many more waiting in the Grenelle town hall. And others, a little later on, blocked off three streets, Grenelle, Saint-Dominique and Université.

By two o'clock, some 14,000 people stood on the Esplanade. Louise arrived with a group that had gathered behind the Institut. One of the *Gaulois* editors, his paper taking a keen interest in this demonstration, went to interview her. "They'll mow you down," he told her. "Aren't you afraid to risk your neck like this?" "I don't give a damn," she replied. "If they kill me, I imagine I'll find less injustice in the kingdom of the worms than I do here." (This is probably a true account of her reply. Worms, along with ravens and wolves, were part of her bestiary

* the collectivists represented one variant of anarchist thought, which insisted that possession should be through voluntary institutions rather than directly by each individual human being — *transl. note*

even though, in normal daily life, she preferred cats.)

She briefly addressed the crowd: "Comrades, our demonstration today is about the right to work. The police wish to prevent us from associating freely with each other. Form close ranks; don't let yourselves be swept away like sheep to the slaughterhouse..." Agents suddenly charged, and she and 1500 other people (some reports say 200) were pushed back towards Avenue de la Motte-Picquet. "To the Elysée!" cried a voice, but Louise jumped up on a bench: "Thank you for having answered our call. What you are doing today is greater than anything a potentate could ever accomplish. We are going to march through Paris together, asking for work and for bread. Long live the Social Revolution!"

Somebody passed her a black rag fastened to the end of a stick and, with her improvised banner, she moved to the head of the crowd. They set off. Passing a bakery on Rue des Canettes, a cry went up: "Bread or work!" Louise was torn by the hard realities of the dilemma, but she shouted, "If you are hungry, take some. But don't hurt the bakers." Demonstrators poured into the bakery, and terrified bakers began handing out bread. Later on, as the procession went along Rue du Four-Saint-Germain, a baker named Mme Augereau hurriedly tried to close her shop. Too late, people took bread and even, what a disgrace, cakes as well. Then M. Moricet's shop at 125 Boul. Saint-Germain, same thing again. But the day's scandals weren't limited to bread: when they passed a former Jesuit residence, somebody cried out, "Down with the crows!" Then they surged into a shop which sold religious statuary and other articles, where they broke a few plaster St. Josephs and models of the baby Jesus.

Fighting broke out in Place Maubert. The demonstrators split into two main groups and, while they were battling the police, comrades helped Louise Michel into a fiacre stationed on Rue des Nonnains-d'Hyères, where she analyzed the day's events for the people of the district, who clustered round her.

She said, "Citizens, we crossed Paris without being arrested. We have shown that the streets belong to us, when we want them to. Nothing prevents us from now going our separate ways. Until Sunday, then! And long live the people, for they are the victors of the day!"

This speech, however, may be much more fantasy than fact, for it comes to us courtesy of the *Gaulois* reporter, whose

objective was to show his readers that this "tramp" was leading France straight down the road to anarchy.

The good people of the Right Bank had been really quite frightened. Some 3,000 demonstrators had crossed the Invalides bridges and headed for the Elysée, overturning benches as they went, walking on the grass and singing that seditious song, the "Marseillaise." Avenue Marigny was blocked by the police, so they turned down Rue Matignon instead.

But they were expected. M. Camescasse, M. Andrieux's successor as police prefect, had positioned himself in front of the home of the president of the Republic. He had erected a barrier by strategically positioning three halted omnibuses. When the demonstrators halted and then drew back from the horses, the police agents happily gave themselves up to the pleasure of "striking blindly in all directions, with the greatest of savagery." One even pulled his sabre, but the others made him sheathe it again.

Arrests were being made in droves — not just the usual scum, but some society people as well. The police had already had the unfortunate experience of laying hands on M. le comte de Kératry, over on the Esplanade. This was doubly unfortunate, because the count was a former police prefect himself, and he fully intended to lay charges of arbitrary arrest. Now they were arresting a *Gaulois* journalist and another count, who happened to be in the vicinity. Meanwhile, the Grenelle and Vaugirard workers were breaking windows on Avenue de La Tour-Maubourg, and M. de Gontaut-Biron's coachman was struck and wounded by a flying object.² As usual, the forces of repression were more brutal than the people they were repressing. In fact, there hadn't really been any "attack" to repress. Wrote *L'Intransigeant*: "Workers are paying the price for things they didn't do." There was great misery in France and "forebearance, patience, even devotion to the public good have their limits." What today could be called "rash" might tomorrow become "legitimate and necessary." The government saw things differently: it saw the fine hand of anarchists and royalists.³

Government obviously couldn't let this pass; there had to be some examples made. And in the whole wretched business, there was no known leader except "the eternal Louise Michel," who had already tried their patience more than once. This time, they'd get her. Not on a charge of verbal violence, which might have unfortunate repercussions for freedom of expression (to

which they were devoted), but for provoking a riot and inciting the pillage of respectably-acquired goods. The examining magistrate, Barbette, issued an order requiring Louise Michel to appear before him, on a charge of inciting a mob to forcible entry, theft and wilful damage.⁴

But Louise Michel had disappeared. Well, where was she? She was slated to attend a meeting called for March 10 to protest police brutality, but she sent the following note instead: "Dear citizens and friends, it appears that the police are preparing, in my honour, a small disturbance for this evening's meeting. Please forgive me for not attending, since I do not wish to satisfy M. Camescasse. Let them call me before the courts* and I'll turn up of my own accord, for that would entail no risk of provoking the arrest of friends as well."⁵ So she didn't appear at the meeting, and the crowd shouted, "Louise Michel or our money back!"⁶

The police were run ragged, trying to keep up with the rumours. It was said she had gone north with Jules Guesde.⁷ It was said the Saint-Etienne socialists had invited her to address a meeting.⁸ It was said she was on her way to Liancourt, the next day or perhaps the day after.⁹ Or was she off to Brussels? The director of the Belgian Sûreté wanted to know.¹⁰ L'Agence Havas telegraphed to say she was in Lyon.¹¹ Others said Anzin. The special train superintendent in Blanc-Misseron asked, fearfully, "What am I to do if she tries to cross the border?"¹² "Arrest her," replied the police prefect who then, in the interest of tighter security, added the following physical description: abundant black hair, long nose, thick lips, high colouring, large mouth, black clothing, hat frequently pushed back from her face."¹³ It was said Louise would go to Montceau-les-Mines on the 18th "Isn't there any order out for this woman?" the departmental prefect petulantly inquired of the minister of the Interior, by coded dispatch. The ministers of Justice and of the Interior were furious with each other. The minister of the Interior complained that he had not been promptly informed that the examining magistrate had issued an order. The minister

* Barbette's order was not the equivalent of what she refers to here as being "called before the courts," i.e. an order for her arrest. Barbette, whose role was to conduct a *pre-trial* inquiry, had issued a "mandat d'amener," which is an order requiring either a suspect or a witness to turn up and talk about the facts of the affair under inquiry. While ultimately enforceable by arrest, it is not the same thing as an arrest order — *transl. note*

of Justice forwarded his complaint to the public prosecutor; the prosecutor replied that the police prefecture was responsible.¹⁴

Signs appeared in Lyon, announcing that Louise Michel would be attending a meeting organized by the Commission for the Distribution of Relief to the Families of Political Prisoners. She'd been seen. She hadn't been seen. The prefect of the department closed the debate: Louise Michel was not in Lyon.¹⁵

Meanwhile, M. Camescasse's detectives conscientiously paced the sidewalk in front of Louise's lodgings on Boul. Ornano. This diligence gained them information of the highest importance, as follows: At 11 p.m. on the evening of March 11, a carriage (licence No. 12,473) drew up at the door. A young man (about thirty, they calculated), wearing a bowler hat, alighted and went in to see Mme Michel. Given the late hour, the agents couldn't follow the carriage as it drove off, but later on they found the driver, who declared that he had picked up this passenger in Place de la République, a man of about 25 to 28 years of age, wearing a bowler hat. He took this young man to *L'Intransigeant*.¹⁶ Another report: on the 13th, a man of about fifty years of age went twice to see Mme Michel. This time they did follow: "Despite pursuing this vehicle at full speed, it was lost, and then found again near *L'Intransigeant*, but it did not halt." At 11:30 that same evening, Mme Michel herself appeared at the window... Two men came out of the house and took a waiting carriage (licence No. 1328). "Because of the speed of the horse, it was not possible to follow this vehicle."¹⁷ On the 15th, three "individuals" appeared, two wearing top hats and the third a round, soft sort of hat.¹⁸

The police superintendent ordered that Louise's rooms be searched. The agents found addresses, invitations from *La Libre Pensée* and a great many requests for help. The servant had been writing a letter to Louise; the policemen's entry interrupted her just as she was about to put the address on the envelope. "You can't foresee everything," grumbled the crestfallen civil servant.¹⁹ *L'Intransigeant* was also under surveillance, with equally handsome results.²⁰

Louise was still on the run. She was seen in the Bastille-Saint-Ouen tram (No. 574) on the 12th.²¹ She was seen in the Pontarlier railway station buffet where, as she paid her bill, she spoke with an English accent. "You assume that lady is English," said a traveller. "But I know her, and I know she's Louise Michel."²² She was reported in Switzerland.²³ In

Montreux, to be exact,²⁴ and expected in Geneva.²⁵ Not at all, she was with a friend in Neuchâtel, telegraphed the Reuters correspondent from Geneva.²⁶ The special railway superintendent in Lyon sent coded messages to his counterparts in Culoz, Frangy, Annemass, Saint-Julien and Annecy: "Kindly arrest Louise Michel..." (abundant black hair, long nose, and the rest of it).²⁷ Then she was said to be in Gand ("Hotbed of revolutionaries"), in London, a favourite revolutionary rallying-point.²⁸ No, she was still in Paris, hiding with the Biron family at 17 Rue François-Miron.²⁹

The faithful detectives still held up the lamp-posts outside 117 Boul. Ornano. 'Louise's mother must be ill,' they reported, "for the maid has now visited the pharmacy several times... A candle always burns between three o'clock and 3:20."³⁰ The cafe in the building buzzed with gossip. Everybody was astounded that Louise still hadn't been arrested. The proprietress insisted that the reason she hadn't been arrested was that she was really a secret agent. The reports continued: "Mme Michel doesn't share her daughter's convictions at all, that's why she is so ill." "She's eighty years old now, she won't recover this time."³¹

An employee of the Chemins de Fer du Nord claimed that he saw Louise leave Paris on the Brussels train, in a second-class compartment. They telegraphed the police stations in Creil, Tergnier and Freignies. Train 25 was minutely searched when it reached Freignies. No Louise. In a "confidential" report, the special superintendent of the Gare du Nord repudiated the employee's claim which, he said, had been made "in a frivolous manner."³² A military surgeon who had spent three years in New Caledonia saw her near Neuchâtel. Not at all, she was in Vevey and often visited Lausanne.³³ Nothing of the sort: she was in Paris, staying with two very rich ladies near Parc Monceau³⁴; no, in Conches, with her aunt. They worked out their whole battleplan for this top-level arrest.³⁵ And then, finally, in Franfort, they managed to arrest Louise Michel. Except that she turned out to be a certain Louise Schnaub, the wife of a Manheim tailor, who of course had to be released immediately. Perhaps this was one of Rochefort's (and *L'Intransigeant's*) "jokes"?³⁶

Louise was never out of the news. False biographies and false birthdates appeared one after the other: born in Troyes, in 1836, of a schoolteacher father,³⁷ and the like. *Le Voltaire* published a supposed interview with Louise Michel, which

L'Intransigeant immediately repudiated: "It's not April Fool's Day yet."³⁸ A crude sort of practical joke went on sale in Paris, a broadsheet entitled, "Manifesto and Proclamation of Louise Michel" signed by one Louise Maboul: "Men are all cowards... One thousand *citoyennes* such as myself and the Revolution will be made... I'll throw the Chamber of Deputies out on its ear... Our borders will be the Caucasus and the Sahara... Long live anarchy!"³⁹

But why didn't they arrest Louise Michel? *Le Parlement* was truly vexed: "By virtue of what special privilege does Louise Michel escape being called to account?"⁴⁰ One brave if anonymous soul abused the police: "So you haven't the courage to arrest this woman who spreads revolution throughout Paris and France?"⁴¹ A good Swiss bourgeois sent a telegram to "M. Grévy, president of the Republic of France, Paris": "Let Louise Michel alone!"⁴² And the police informer who used the name of "Howe" believed he was reporting general public opinion when he wrote: "People are beginning to say that the government makes a great mistake to treat Louise Michel like a dangerous political agitator, as if she were someone of importance... It would be much better to wait for her to reappear, arrest her, have a few doctors who specialize in mental alienation examine her and produce the necessary certificate with which to lock her up in Charenton... The public would welcome this approach."⁴³

And then, Louise *did* reappear. All the time she was being "sighted" in Geneva, Gand and Brussels, she was in fact quietly waiting it out at the home of *L'Intransigeant's* editor, Ernest Vaughan, 26 Rue Censier. On March 29 at about 6 p.m., accompanied by Vaughan, she marched into the police prefecture. Not having any calling cards of her own (that hallmark of the bourgeoisie), she took one of Vaughan's and sent it in to M. Camescasse with the following message written on the back: "Mlle Louise Michel, who does not choose to be arrested either at public meetings or at her mother's home, wishes to inform M. Camescasse that, having taken the necessary steps for her mother's comfort, she is now entirely at his disposition."⁴⁴ A scene of true high comedy: Louise paying back M. Camescasse in M. Andrieux's own coin. But M. Camescasse was not the equal of his predecessor. He was now in a ridiculous position and he knew it: either he had to give her the satisfaction of arresting her right in his own offices while his agents scoured France in vain, or he had to let her leave the premises and perhaps give him

the slip once again. He panicked; he had word sent out that he wasn't there. "I thought that a more gallant, a more *French*, way to behave," he later explained, in an attempt to save face.⁴⁵ And then he quickly dispatched agents to keep watch on Vaughan's home.

Louise calmly visited her mother, and then returned to Rue Censier.

The farce continued. The next morning's *L'Intransigeant* carried a formal notice from Mlle Louise Michel to M. Camescasse, informing him that she would be at his disposal until 10 o'clock that day, Rue Censier. When 10 o'clock had come and gone with no word from the police prefect, Louise left the house and climbed into a fiacre, accompanied by Vaughan and another of the paper's editors, Giffault, who was a New Caledonia "graduate" himself. (The fiacre in question was No. 9092, as the watching agents duly — perhaps maliciously? — noted). The policemen moved to stop the horses. "We're on our way to the prefecture," Vaughan told them, "so you don't need to take us there. But if you'd like a ride yourselves, please climb in." The agents, who really wanted to make an arrest, tried once again outside the Rue Monge police station to halt the horses and take Louise inside. She refused. They threatened to call on the nearby policemen walking the beat for a little muscle-power, "should you create a disturbance." "You're creating the disturbance," she answered, "since all I'm trying to do is go to the prefecture." A crowd was beginning to gather, and Vaughan and Giffault advised her to enter the police station. The superintendent, a M. Lévy, was an exceedingly pleasant man, who proceeded to chat with Louise most agreeably for an hour and a half. He then received orders to conduct her to Quai de l'Horloge. Vaughan and Giffault, who followed them there, brought a complaint against the two agents, alleging illegal arrest. The assistant public prosecutor, however, found nothing illegal about it at all.⁴⁶

The examining magistrate, Barbette, felt he had been an object of public ridicule ever since he had issued the famous order for her appearance three weeks earlier. Now he would have his opportunity to interrogate this formidable prisoner. Louise denied having organized the ransacking of bakeries.⁴⁷ "I saw so many men die in May 1871, I see so many people die of hunger even today, I'm hardly going to spend my time thinking about a few crusts of bread..."⁴⁸ She was locked up in the cells overnight

and transferred to Saint-Lazare the next day, April 1.⁴⁹ But somehow, before leaving for that "country estate," she found a way to send a congratulatory message to *La Bataille* for its anniversary: "Carry on, combat paper, bear high your name in the struggle that envelopes us all... Were we equal to our convictions, the Revolution would be an easy matter. But never mind, it will happen yet. The best and most efficient demolition of the old structures is being carried out by the oppressors themselves. So let us rejoice. If they import the Russian system to fight us, we'll have the courage of the Russians to destroy it. Long live the Social Revolution!"⁵⁰

Le Pays exulted: "And about time! Louise Michel in full battle, defying the police and the courts both... The two republics will confront each other very soon. For make no mistake, Louise Michel is legion. She is the avenging angel of all those trampled by misfortune, the outcasts, the desperate, the shattered. However the bourgeoisie twist and turn, Louise Michel will vanquish their government... And if they make her a martyr, she would only be that much more powerful."⁵¹ *La France*, in contrast, was distinctly snide: "It was hardly the keen wits of the police detectives that brought this whole chase to an end"; indeed, they seem only to arrest "voluntary prisoners." And throwing Louise Michel "on the dampest straw of the deepest dungeon" will only allow her to create a new legend about herself, "the legend of distress."⁵²

Not exactly distress, if we go by the cartoons that continued to appear. One depicted her as a Sister of Charity, rifle clutched firmly in one hand and a wounded man in the other. The inscription read, "Father, finally I appear before you to renounce my foolish ways. It is through my own folly that I am now a captive. Through reason I shall someday be free... I swear never again to appear frivolously on stage."⁵³ Another cartoon showed her as a witch and printed below some newly-invented words for an old tune*:

*Le drapeau noir flottait au vent,
Louise Michel était en avant...*⁵⁴

A third was in quite another vein: "She is inspired, a true believer... In former times, such women were burned. Now we merely throw them into the torment of Saint-Lazare, with its thieves, adulterers, white-slavers and prostitutes. She is locked

* "Ca me coupe la gueule à quinze pas" — *author's note*

up for proclaiming that all men are brothers... An unpardonable delusion.”⁵⁵

In fact, Louise was very comfortable at Saint-Lazare, a prison where she had already spent two weeks. Everybody wanted to see her again: the other prisoners considered her their “comforter” and the nuns, “an atheistic Providence.” Even the director esteemed her highly, for her general good influence.⁵⁶

Louise was classified as a first-class miscreant, which meant she had a room to herself and was allowed to supplement prison food with supplies from outside.⁵⁷ She received a great many visitors, among them Vaughan, Mme Biras, Giffault, Crié, Mme Blin and the Huot family.⁵⁸

With Judge Barbette’s help and the anarchist community’s willing conspiracy of silence, Louise managed to hide from her mother the fact that she was again in prison. The judge even permitted her to leave prison and visit the old woman at home.⁵⁹ The deception worked perfectly: after ten minutes of conversation on April 14, Marianne begged Louise to cut short her visit “to avoid being arrested.” Louise was able to visit her mother throughout May and into June, sometimes spending up to half an hour with the now-reassured old lady.⁶⁰

Louise did not find prison life unpleasant. She was used to it and at ease with it. In contrast to the tumult of her life outside, it offered her time to recoup her energies, to meditate. This warrior-nun had a strong contemplative streak: “Prison is like the desert. It is the same sensation, whether you are in a space where the eye can discern no outer limits or in a tiny enclosure turned in upon itself: the infinite is all-enveloping... It is the point at which the two immensities of past and future meet, and mingle.”⁶¹

And then, there were all the other prisoners who could be helped, and from whom so much could be learned. Just as she had once studied the tribal languages of New Caledonia, Louise now set herself to study the rich and varied slang of the prostitutes, “varieties all mixed up together like writhing monsters and yet sometimes they take charming shapes, for slang is living language. Its imagery is either touchingly innocent, or violently bloody.” She talked about the rapid evolution, the unfailing creative pulse of this street language: “There are geniuses among the people who speak slang, they’re artists and creators.” But they are inevitably crushed and cast aside by “that old tramp, capitalist society.” That society turns them “into beasts and then, once they are utterly broken,

tortures them.”⁶²

When Louise looked at the women who surrounded her in prison, she saw only victims. The prostitute was innocent; the guilty party was the “scrofulous bourgeois, slaving for a new piece of flesh.” The worker who stole ends of cloth or surreptitiously made some matches on the side was not guilty; the adulteress was not guilty (and was her husband always faithful?); the old woman dying of hunger who screamed invective at a policeman was not guilty. No. Society was the guilty party, society alone and entirely.⁶³

The police, naturally enough, did not share this point of view. Even in prison, Louise was kept under surveillance. And, even in prison (as elsewhere), Louise suffered from some “unpleasant visitors.” There was the Gérard woman, for example, also called de la Falconnière, who had once faced a charge of bigamy, though she was finally acquitted. She told Louise how her employer had handed her over to an old man. Louise believed the story (and why not?) and wanted to put it on paper, with the arresting title, “The Lost Child.” Louise even asked the woman to go and visit Marianne on her behalf when she got out of Saint-Lazare, cautioning her to say that they had met at Vaughan’s home. In truth, the Gérard woman was nothing but an adventuress who’d made her way through various bordellos, ending up with a bar on Rue Cujas, “its waitresses being girls of easy virtue, like all girls in the Latin Quarter.”⁶⁴ But after all, Louise and the police reached their conclusions from very different starting-points.

Louise was receiving a barrage of particularly violent letters from ultra-anarchists, ultra-leftists and plain good republicans. One sample: “You sellout, you’re in league with the police, we know all about your long-delayed arrest, your well-organized publicity, your carriages, you filthy cow.” It went on: Lissagaray dined on oysters, Rochefort owned a hotel and had his own personal valet, Emile Gautier worked for the police. And it was signed: “True Republicans.”⁶⁵

Barbette, meanwhile, was continuing his pre-trial inquiry into the bakeries affair. Agents probing the scene in Lagny and Conches came up with horrifying discoveries. In Lagny, revolutionary pamphlets were being distributed and read aloud in the wine-merchant’s shop. Worse: the distribution network was directed by the Lagny police sergeant himself, who forced his subordinates to do the legwork. Or again: the mayor of

Gouvernes (Seine-et-Marne) was related to Louise Michel's uncle, who lived in Conches. Alas, poor France! ⁶⁶ Rumours circulated that when Louise finally came to trial, "they" (the ever-mysterious "they") would try to intimidate the jurors and win an acquittal through sheer terror. ⁶⁷ By now Mme Moricet, the baker who would be appearing as a witness, was having nightmares and demanded police protection. ⁶⁸

Louise, too, was preparing for her trial. On June 8, she was visited by Rochefort and a lawyer, Me Balandreau, who had once defended Théophile Ferré's brother. ⁶⁹ Louise, however, was going to handle her own defence once again, and she was well-equipped to do it. After all, she came from a family of magistrates and lawyers, and was very thoroughly grounded in jurisprudence. She sent a letter for publication in *La Bataille*, concerning a revolver which she claimed to be her own, even though it had been found on Pouget. "The attorney-general sees no point in ordering that my witnesses be subpoenaed, since the revolver in question was of legal calibre. Therefore, I am obliged to subpoena them myself, through the bailiff." The calibre of the gun wasn't the issue. "I shall not allow another accused to take the blame for something that is entirely mine." ⁷⁰ On June 20, she was transferred from Saint-Lazare to the central police cells in Paris, to await her appearance the next day before the Assizes Court. ⁷¹

Extraordinary precautions were taken. At 9 a.m., the police began dispersing the crowd that was already forming outside the courthouse. Inside, the witness benches were cleared. The benches reserved for those invited by the presiding judge were packed. There were a great many journalists on hand, and lawyers in full courtroom regalia.

The foreman of the jury had received a threatening letter, signed "Prudence (Secret Society of Paris)." It read, "If you do not acquit all the accused in the Ramé case, we shall execute you the next day. Take heed, for you are sure to die... Warn your colleagues. Salutations and Revolution." ⁷² This trial, in short, was going to be quite an event. And everybody who could remember Louise's behaviour before the Council of War had very high expectations indeed.

The bit players were brought in at 11:15: Moreau, Martinet, the Bouillet woman and the like. One half hour later, the hearing began. In came the principal actors: Louise, Pouget, Mareuil. The charge presented them as the leaders and instigators of the

mob that had ransacked the bakeries by brute force. Pouget was also charged with having insulted police officers and with having had in his possession "murderous and incendiary devices." Mareuil had the further charge of having shouted, "Long live the Revolution! Long live the Commune! Down with the police!" and, furthermore, of having incited murder and arson by distributing the brochure *A l'Armée*. This booklet read, in part: "Soldiers, never forget that yesterday you were part of the proletariat and that you return to it tomorrow." Further on: "Show no pity to those who, for personal, criminal gain, subject France to such unspeakable convulsions." The importance of this brochure was clear. The Paris demonstration could easily have taken on an insurrectional character, the agitation could have spread to the provinces and the role of the brochure was to help bring that about. Ransacking bakeries was merely the "prelude"; the issue here was really a conspiracy against the security of the State. In other words, treason. Therefore, your honour, felonies and misdemeanours under articles 59 and 60 of the Criminal Code; 23, 24 etc. of the Law of July 29, 1881; 226 and 227 of the Code of Criminal Procedure...

Now the tragi-comedy could begin. Its star was Louise Michel. She continued her practice of shaving a few years from her age, this time telling the judge that she was 47 years old (she was really 53).

The judge: "Have you had any previous convictions?" Louise Michel: "Yes, in 1871." The judge, annoyed: "That may no longer be mentioned. All that was covered by the general amnesty. Have you had any convictions since then?" "Yes, fifteen days in prison for the Blanqui demonstration." He exclaimed, "You don't miss a single one, do you?" "I am always at the side of the downtrodden."

What had she expected to happen at that demonstration on the Esplanade? "There were, at the time, more than 60,000 unemployed workers in Paris. I expected the government to follow its usual tactics and disperse the crowd with gunfire. It would have been cowardice on my part not to be present." It was quite by accident that she had met up with Mareuil and Pouget. "Did you expect this demonstration to create jobs?" "I've already told you, no. I was there out of a sense of duty."

And what about her own "special little demonstration?" "It was the workers' cry. I merely wanted it to be heard." And the black flag? "Black flags don't drop miraculously into one's

hands on the Esplanade des Invalides," noted the judge. Louise: "All it takes is a black rag and a broom handle... That's the banner of strikes and of suffering..."

But then they ransacked the bakeries and that, stated the judge, "has always been the prelude to revolution." Louise answered, "I am not to blame if people are as badly-off today as they were in '89." Hungry street-urchins did the ransacking; she, personally, would "die of hunger" before she'd take a thing. But nonetheless, she had dipped her flag, she had given the signal for the pillage? "I haven't the strength of Hercules in my arm. If I jiggled the flag, it was simply to relax my nerves..."

Ah, but she had been laughing as she stood outside M. Moricet's shop. "I can't imagine what I would have found to amuse me. Perhaps the misery of the people around me...? This is all very stupid. People can only obey a signal that they know about. We would have had to spread the word all around Paris that I would be raising and lowering a flag outside the bakeries."

And had she known about the brochure, *A l'Armée*, which was being distributed in the provinces? Now Louise went on the offensive: "When the Orléanists rose against the Republic, I was one of those who wanted to defend her. I was the one who caused that brochure to be distributed."

What about the flammable materials that had been found at Pouget's? This time her reply was evasive: "Everybody today is interested in science. Everybody reads *La Revue scientifique* and tries to improve the worker's lot."

Pouget complained that it was his beliefs they were putting on trial. "You have declared war on society," replied the judge. "You must reasonably expect society to defend herself."

Mareuil declared that he was not himself "needy" and that he had joined the demonstration out of solidarity.

They called the witnesses. First M. Bouché, a baker on Rue des Canettes. He didn't recognize Louise Michel, but he could say it wasn't street-urchins who cleaned out his shop, it was men, armed with canes, "people who had attained the age of reason." (Laughter.)

Louise: "The people with lead-tipped canes weren't our people. I know very well who they were." The judge, who should have known better, asked, "Who were they?" "Police." (Laughter.)

Mme Augereau, baker, recognized Louise Michel as the woman who had stopped outside her door. "Those gentlemen

came in and stole the bread and the biscuits. They broke a plate and two windowpanes." Her daughter, Rosalie, testified that she had seen a woman outside their door, with a black flag. "Right in front of our place," she tapped her flag on the ground. Somebody said, "Go on" and then people swarmed into the store and grabbed everything.

Moricet, baker, had been having a nap. His granddaughter came to wake him up. "There's a lot of people in the shop and I saw a woman with a black flag." His wife, also a baker, testified she saw Louise Michel laugh and then strike the ground with her flag. "They asked for bread or work. I gave them some bread, but then they began helping themselves, and breaking everything."

"What do you make of this testimony?" the judge asked Louise. "It's clear enough." She replied, "So clear that I never saw any such thing." (Laughter.) "How could I possibly have laughed? Madame dreamed the whole thing."

Mme Moricet was quivering with fear but she spoke out all the same: "I'm here to tell you what I saw." Louise: "Say whatever you like; I may equally say you dreamed the whole thing."

A detective came forward to testify that in Place Maubert, Louise said to him, "Don't hurt us, we're only asking for bread." "It wasn't like that at all. I said, 'We won't hurt *you*.'" And she added in a lower voice, "I object, in the name of the honour of the Revolution. I have never prostrated myself before anybody; I have never asked mercy. Say whatever you like, convict us, but I protest this attempt to dishonour us."

The next day's proceedings opened with the expulsion of the socialists and anarchists from the hall. Then all the little Moricet children came forward to recite their lessons. Louise Michel remembered her schoolteacher past: "I'll not stoop to answer the silly things offered up by the Moricet girl, her sister, her cousin, her little brother. It is a disgrace to see children parroting lessons taught them by their parents."

The defence, in turn, called as a witness a painter who worked in that district. He declared that Louise had walked past the bakery without stopping and that its owners had thrown bread to the poor unfortunates, who scooped it up from the street. Rochefort and Vaughan testified to the pacifist nature of the demonstration. And one of Mme Michel's neighbours said that Mme Biras, who looked after Marianne, was the victim of

considerable abuse. Louise: "You see, they hound us right inside our family circle. But that, of course, is permitted."

The trial continued. M. de Quesnay de Beaurepaire presented his indictment. He was said to have "a silver tongue," and now he put it to work: Louise Michel was the Three Furies incarnate, a Semiramis* with her army at her back; Mareuil and Pouget were mere "viziers to this female sultan of anarchy." While he recognized that the sultan had private virtues, those virtues translated into her public life as a kind of "mental aberration." Furthermore, it was a question of common law. "People who try to overthrow everything soon reach the limits of liberty." This former schoolteacher could not be allowed to toy with the public peace and order of a city like Paris. "You must convict her, gentlemen of the jury." (Uproar.)

Louise then defended herself or, more precisely, ignored the whole nonsense about ransacking bakeries, and instead pleaded the cause of anarchism. "This is a political trial and we who stand before you are not its true objects; it is aimed through us, at the anarchist party..." She spoke of the Commune: "The attorney-general has invoked the Law of 1871** against us, that law of the victors against the vanquished, against those whom they crushed as the mill crushes the grain. The Federals were being hounded, Galliffet chased us into the very catacombs, bodies lay heaped on every street-corner in Paris..."

Louise presented herself as the symbol of the defeated Commune and the eternal, self-renewing Revolution. She wished also to speak for all women: "A woman who dares to conduct her own defence, who dares to think, who rejects the Proudhonian alternative 'housewife or courtesan', that shocks and dismays you..." She explained their choice of the black flag: "We have used the black flag because this was a peaceful demonstration, because it is the flag of strikes and starvation. The red flag is now in the cemeteries; we'll not wave it again until we can defend it. This time, we couldn't have defended it. I've told you, I'll tell you again, this was a peaceful demonstration..."

"Of course I went to the demonstration. I had to go. Why was I arrested? I've criss-crossed Europe, saying that I didn't

* legendary Assyrian queen, reputed founder of Babylon and Ninevah

** in the immediate aftermath of the Commune, all socialist activities were repressed and soon after the International banned as a subversive organization; in consequence, all socialist or anarchist activity was illegal in France for more than a decade — *transl. notes*

recognize borders, that humanity as a whole has the right to the heritage of all humanity. But those who accept slavery as their daily lot in life cannot claim this heritage; it is for those who are free and know how to live that freedom...

"It is we who defended the Republic, because we founded it with our 35,000 dead bodies. The attorney-general had a great deal to say about soldiers. If the soldiers at Sedan had turned their guns on those who betrayed them, we would not have known the humiliation that followed."

Louise looked beyond the law of the jungle then dominating society to "the coming dawn of liberty and equality..." She said, "We live in misery still. How then does this Republic differ from the Empire? How can you talk about the autonomy of the courts when the dungeons lurk in the background?"

"I wanted the cry of the workers to be heard. You'll dispose of me as you wish. But that will not settle anything, for I am not the issue. Larger and larger sections of France become anarchist... The authority of one man is a crime. What we want is the authority of all."

Louise rejected the attorney-general's accusation that she wanted to be a "leader." "I have too much pride for that. I'll never demean myself, and to be a leader is to demean oneself."

But back to this question of bread and the Moricet family, a question which, by now, was almost lost to view. "I find it difficult even to talk about this business. Must we really discuss the distribution of some crumbs of bread to children?"

She concluded her speech: "For you, the homeland is only a staging-ground for war; our boundaries, matters for intrigue. We, however, have a much larger definition of homeland and family: that is our real crime. This is an age of anxiety, everybody is trying to find his way. We'll continue to say: 'Let them do their worst! We'll fight for liberty! We'll fight for equality! And when liberty and equality reign, then we'll be happy.' "

The next day, June 23, the lawyers presented their defence for Pouget and the other accused. Louise took the stand once again: "This is a political trial. You will be judging a political trial..." The State considered her the most important of all the accused. She didn't argue this point (in fact, it must have pleased her) but she did claim that, if so, she and she alone should be convicted. "You've claimed that I mesmerized my friends; if so, deal only with me. I have long sacrificed my person

to the cause... I see only the Revolution, it is the Revolution which I shall always serve and which I salute. May it take its place in a world of living men, and not empty ruins..."

The jury retired to consider a total of thirty-five charges. They returned one and a half hours later: Mareuil, Onfroy, Martinet and Mme Bouillet were all acquitted; Louise Michel, Pouget, Moreau were found guilty, but with extenuating circumstances. Louise was sentenced to six years' imprisonment plus ten years' police surveillance; Pouget, to eight years' imprisonment and ten years' surveillance; Moreau, to one year in prison.

Louise, of course, refused to appeal the verdict. "Never! You are excellent imitations of the magistrates of the Empire!" Voices in the audience cried out, "Long live Louise Michel! Down with the jury! Long live the Revolution!"

Lisbonne was expelled from the court. The waiting crowd in Place Dauphine began to disperse.⁷³

It was a controversial verdict. Some, like *La Liberté*, were very much in favour: "Society has finally chosen to defend herself and the jury, an institution of the people, has shown that it's time to make a few examples."⁷⁴ *Le XIXe Siècle* praised the jury for its independent judgment.⁷⁵ *Le National*, however, thought that Pouget had been dealt with too lightly and Louise Michel too harshly: "We readily agree that Mlle Michel's temporary [six years!] disappearance will be a relief to the public. We have wearied of all this ostentatious virginity, these displays of fishwife emotions, these appeals to hatred which, in the name of brotherhood, set one citizen against another." If the anarchists were allowed to preach their disgusting policies, "it would be the end of France."⁷⁶ *La Marseillaise*, however, predicted: "Two more court judgments like those, and the anarchist party might become a reality."⁷⁷

La Réforme wondered if Louise Michel was truly fanatic, or merely insane: "In either case, Mlle Louise Michel, with her gifts of mind and heart, should aspire to the glory of the Roman matron, she should stay at home." But alas, she took to the streets instead, "and society must defend itself against her ranting outbursts."⁷⁸ *La Lanterne* thought her a much more appropriate candidate for Charenton* than for Mazas,* but agreed she had forced the situation and must now be taken

* insane asylum and main prison, respectively — *transl. note*

seriously.⁷⁹

Then there was the other point of view: the conviction was monstrous. "Vengeance, not justice," snapped *L'Electeur*, June 25. *Le Figaro*, courting the risk of being taken for one of her accomplices, spoke of "the great leaps of mind, the generous and altruistic impulses to be found in this mad soul, which disturb the cold judgment and scepticism of better-balanced minds."⁸⁰ Why imprison "an exalted, generous woman who wants only to sacrifice her liberty and her life?" asked *Le Rappel*.⁸¹ The radical, Camille Pelletan, wrote in *La Justice*: "People look at this amazing verdict and cry, 'You call her a common thief?' Even until yesterday, most of the public could look at the utter failure of her crusade and dismiss her as a woman whose great generosity of heart had tricked her into joining all those ill-fated demonstrations. Today, that attitude has completely disappeared." Now people were struck only by the passionate self-sacrifice, the "fanaticism of devotion... as ardent, as total as the exalted piety which mystics call 'the ecstasy of the Cross.'" To sentence Louise Michel to six years' imprisonment as a common thief "was either a wicked decision, or simply an incompetent one." Pelletan hoped an amnesty might be declared on July 14.⁸² As far as Rochefort was concerned, the whole trial had been "the very model of a penny-dreadful novel, brought to us courtesy of those Ponson du Terrail* of the public prosecutor's office for the Seine." The police had laid their trap, and Louise had fallen into it. Political acts had been twisted into acts of common crime.⁸³

La Gazette and *Le Pays* thought the anarchists and the "men of September 4"*** deserved each other.

The provinces had a mixed reaction. They approved heartily of the verdict itself — ransacking bakeries, indeed! next they'll be burning our mills! — but, bourgeoisie and workers alike, they were divided about the sentence. The general opinion was that it was unduly severe.⁸⁴

The various factions of the revolutionary socialist party came together long enough to declare its solidarity with all the deeds ascribed to Louise Michel and Pouget.⁸⁵ As usual,

* Pierre Alexis Ponson du Terrail (1829 - 71) was not only a viscount but the author of stories which were serialized in the newspapers, each installment ending with cliff-hanging suspense

** the representatives of the bourgeoisie who toppled the emperor and ushered in the Third Republic, September 4, 1870 — *transl. notes*

repression was a powerful force for unity within revolutionary ranks; they could at least agree to oppose the government on this one. And that, precisely, was what the Chamber of Deputies now feared. Excessively-severe verdicts are neither justice nor good politics; they merely provide cohesion for movements that otherwise lack it. Government ministers blamed the jury; the public, however, could then point out that government had drawn up the indictment and had directed both the attorney-general and the judges who fixed the sentences. Could one still really talk about an independent judiciary? Public liberties were threatened by the path this regime now chose to walk.⁸⁶

There was a flurry of protest meetings: by Parisian anarchists (in Salle Blanche),⁸⁷ by the revolutionary socialists of Grenoble and of Marseille, by the revolutionary women of Lyon.⁸⁸ Firminy anarchists protested,⁸⁹ so did the study circles of the third and fourth arrondissements, so did the anarchist circle of masonry workers of the fifth arrondissement,⁹⁰ the Montlhéry socialist group,⁹¹ the revolutionary socialists of the Belfort garrison, and on and on it went.

More concretely, people began distributing lists of the names and addresses of all the judges, jurors and witnesses for the prosecution in the Louise Michel case.⁹² "They say 160,000 lists have been sent to the provinces," wrote the attorney-general of the Seine to the police prefect. "Is that true?"⁹³

L'Intransigeant and *La Bataille* began raising funds for the families of the convicted.⁹⁴ There were rumours of pardon. Two deputies of the Republican Left made representations before the president, but M. Grévy was unmoved.⁹⁵ The hard-line papers demanded amnesty, not pardon.* "Amnesty would be a fatal blow to the Republic," cried *Le Soir*,⁹⁶ and *Le Courrier de Lyon* agreed: "Whatever they do, they mustn't declare an amnesty. It would defy public opinion and frighten it as well."⁹⁷ *Le Figaro* reminded its readers: "We kill poisonous snakes, we don't leave panthers to roam at will. Moreover, we amnestied the Communards: just see where that has landed us!"⁹⁸ Louise Michel was "not so much guilty as insane," agreed. A lunatic

* a politically significant distinction, as these highly politicized papers well knew. Amnesty, unlike pardon, applies to whole categories rather than to individuals, and wipes the slate clean. It also contains the tacit suggestion that the government thinks it may have erred in prosecuting in the first place, while pardon assumes that the person pardoned was indeed guilty all along — *transl. note*

asylum would be a more appropriate place for her than a prison. However, said *Le Siècle*, June 28: "if we agree to consider her as being in full possession of her faculties, then amnesty is unjustifiable."

A coy bit of yellow journalism hit the walls of Paris: "Louise Michel brought to term in Saint-Lazare!... Latest details: Louise Michel brings forth...a speech."⁹⁹ People caught putting up this poster were arrested. "What should I do with them?" the superintendent of police for the district of Ile Madeleine asked the police prefect. "The sale of this poster is forbidden in public places," was his reply.¹⁰⁰

Rocheport was furious: The public prosecutor's office was bearing down heavily on socialist writers, while gently tapping the wrists of the scoundrels who exploited the public credulity with this sort of misleading trash. "A particular example comes to mind, and we do not choose to identify it any more closely than that, which gravely insults Louise Michel, who is now in prison. It is an act of depravity to attack a woman whose entire life is a continuing example of honesty. It is worse than depravity, it is cowardice to attack her when she is already suffering the heavy blows of conviction and imprisonment."¹⁰¹

Mme Anathalie Rambasson, a Geneva singer, wrote some verses in Louise's honour which testified more to her good heart than to literary talent:

*Le petit oiseau dans sa cage
Privé de sa liberté...*¹⁰²

The upheavals of Louise's life, however, inspired serious literary response as well. Hugo had written a poem about her appearance before the Council of War. Verlaine dedicated a ballad to her:

*Madame et Pauline Roland,
Charlotte, Théroigne, Lucile,
Presque Jeanne d'Arc étoilant
Le front de la foule imbécile,
Nom des cieux, coeur divin qu'exile
Cette espèce de moins que rien
France bourgeoise au dos facile
Louise Michel est très bien.*

*Elle aime le Pauvre âpre et franc,
Ou timide; elle est la faucille
Dans le blé mûr pour le pain blanc*

*Du Pauvre, et la sainte Cécile
Et la Muse rauque et gracile,
Du Pauvre et son ange gardien
A ce simple, à cet indocile.
Louise Michel est très bien.*

*Gouvernement de maltalent,
Mégathérium ou bacille,
Soldat brut, robin insolent,
Ou quelque compromis fragile,
Géant de boue aux pieds d'argile,
Tout cela son courroux chrétien
L'écrase d'un mépris agile.
Louise Michel est très bien.*

Envoi

*Citoyenne, votre évangile
On meurt pour! C'est l'Honneur! et bien
Loin des Taxil est des Bazile
Louise Michel est très bien.¹⁰³*

Louise Michel was no less controversial inside prison walls than without.

XIII - MORE PRISONS

Louise had been returned to Saint-Lazare on a temporary basis. She wrote the police prefect asking that she be allowed to stay there for an extended period of time: "You must realize that since I voluntarily turned myself in to you, knowing that I faced five to twenty years in jail, it's hardly my intention to try to escape. If you have any faith in my word (and I have never broken it), you might consider permitting me to remain in Saint-Lazare for some time yet. My hope is that my mother might thereby survive this news, a blow which she cannot be dealt just yet. Perhaps you would allow me to visit her once again? She is completely unaware of all that has happened, and thinks I am still living with friends. Take all the security precautions you wish, even though, in my case, they are unnecessary. Every human being has a mother, who should be spared any involvement with the battlefield." Then she added a postscript: "I've just heard that my mother knows everything. I have written her that her informants were mistaken, that I am only sentenced to one year. Please allow me to see her before she dies; this news is the fatal blow."¹ She also asked permission to receive visits from Vaughan, Rochefort, Lisbonne and her mother's two neighbours, Mme Blin and Mme Biras.²

Louise's goal now was to save her mother's life and, as far as possible, to comfort and reassure her. She wrote to Dr. Vaillant who then co-operated with Vaughan and Doctors Clemenceau and Dubois to assure medical care for Marianne. Vaillant to Vaughan: "Do whatever it takes to put our friend's mind at rest

about her mother and to assure the old lady the medical attentions she needs.”³ As this suggests, Louise’s friends surrounded her with a web of solidarity. Rochefort visited her in Saint-Lazare. Together they laughed at the “nonsense” that had been spouted by M. Quesnay de Beaurepaire, the public prosecutor. While Louise hoped that her imprisonment would inject new strength into “the sacred cause of society’s rejects,” her one real preoccupation was her mother. Newspaper vendors had hawked their papers under Marianne’s window, crying out the news of her daughter’s conviction. Louise, however, had managed to persuade Marianne that the sentence was for one year only and that it would be served in Saint-Lazare.⁴

The director of Saint-Lazare also opposed the idea of her transfer from his prison to Clermont — though for a different reason. She had such influence over the other prisoners that when she was there, supervision was virtually unnecessary. Louise gave away the contents of every package she received from outside. “To keep her from dying quite literally of starvation,” wrote Rochefort, “the director and I had to stand over her and force her to eat the biscuits that I had just brought her.”⁵

Messages of sympathy came pouring in. Most were intercepted by prison authorities, one of them being a note from Victorine Rouchy, another *pétroleuse*. She hadn’t been able to attend the trial and she refused to ask “people like that” for permission to visit Louise in jail.⁶ The anarchists of Toulon, of Mézières, of Les Batignolles all sent their greetings. Even letters that contained “nothing of significance” to the authorities were intercepted.⁷ Better safe than sorry.

On July 15 at 5 a.m., Louise was duly handed over to the agents who were to escort her to Clermont. She took with her an “earpick,” which she seemed to consider an important possession, and a few francs. She became very emotional and asked the director of Saint-Lazare to thank all the nuns and all the prison staff on her behalf.⁸ She wrote Vaughan: “I’m on my way. Don’t worry yourself. Please tell *maman* that some rumours have been circulating about a possible escape so it’s going to be difficult to see me for a while.”⁹

Rochefort vented his indignation in *L’Intransigeant*: “It is Waldeck’s* pleasure that this woman, who is the spirit of

* Pierre Marie René Waldeck-Rousseau (1846 - 1904), then minister of the Interior — *transl. note*

devotion, loyalty and honour itself, must now serve her sentence in the company of common thieves and murderers.”¹⁰ But Louise and her dear friend the marquis had different criteria: for her, there were no “moral dregs,” no “guilty parties,” there were only victims of society.

If any prison can possibly resemble the gaols and dungeons of romantic legend, it was Clermont, for Clermont was originally a fortified castle in the days of King Louis. Louise (prisoner No. 1327) saw it as a living reminder of feudal oppression, the direct ancestor of the equally repressive society in which she herself lived. The castle stirred old memories for the erstwhile *demoiselle* of Vroncourt, the girl who had long ago played her lyre seated high in the chateau’s towers, and these were memories which all the fever of proletarian meetings had never managed entirely to erase.

She was assigned Cell 26 on the main floor: a tiny room, longer than wide, lit only by the daylight that entered the barred window. She had an iron bed with mattress, bolster and coverlet, a table fixed to the wall and a stool attached to the table by a chain... Louise was tormented by the thought of six years in such cramped quarters: “It seems one always suffers a bizarre reaction to a new prison. One feels such terrible anxiety. Captivity is suddenly more terrifying than ever.” One then adjusts to the new surroundings, “But the first night is always dreadful... You say to yourself, ‘Here is where I must live, cut off from every other human being, for this many months, for this many years...’ ” It was the feeling of being buried alive, of suffocating. As in the Edgar Allan Poe story, “the walls seem to be gradually contracting, the ceiling to be gradually lowering itself...”¹¹

Louise had always had very good relations with the religious sisters working in prisons. Here in Clermont, however, the jailers were the masters. One of them, named Garenflot, only regretted that he had not had Louise in his gunsights during the Commune: “I’d have slaughtered you like a wild duck, and with a great deal more pleasure.” She was called, “*Madame la pétroleuse*” and “*madame arsonist*.” A change of prison directors proved to be for the worse: the new man had lost an arm fighting the insurgents of 1871. Louise was thrown in the dungeons for a month.¹²

Louise worried incessantly about where her mother would live. To Vaughan: “Tell Rochefort they must not even attempt

to move mother for another year. It would finish her." What would happen to the poor old woman if they took away "all her familiar bric-à-brac?"¹³ She worked out an elaborate deception, a true theatrical masterpiece, to convince her mother that she was still in Saint-Lazare: each of her letters was to be neatly decapitated, thus removing the Clermont stamp. Marianne, who was illiterate, dictated letters of reply. She recalled old family memories, talked about her daughter's great-grandfather de Mahis who was "as you know, chief magistrate under Louis XVI."¹⁴ She gently lectured Louise: "Take care of yourself as best you can. You know that at home you were very negligent. What must it be like in prison? In the old days, you know, I liked to scold you, I admit it. It made me feel closer to you. How I wish those times could come again."¹⁵

Then Louise heard that her mother wanted to visit her in Saint-Lazare. The discovery would be "certain death." She begged Vaughan to play for time, to say that she, Louise, would get permission to make "an external visit."¹⁶ And indeed, she *did* get that permission. The planned visit promptly became an affair of State.

The under-secretary of state for the ministry of the Interior personally sent instructions to the police prefect: "I leave this matter to your discretion and I urge you to take any measures necessary to ensure that the presence of Louise Michel in Paris does not spark any unfortunate incidents."¹⁷ The prefect took unprecedented measures. There had never been such a deployment of police, not even for the highest officials of the Republic. The special superintendent of the Gare du Nord was advised that on the night of August 31, at 9:50 p.m., Louise Michel would arrive by prison van from Clermont. "She is to be handed over, in your presence, to agents of the Sûreté. At approximately 5:30 a.m., these agents will return Louise Michel to your office and hand her back to the prison-van officials. You are to instruct Louise Michel most solemnly to make no attempt to escape the officers who have been ordered, and you are to repeat that order, not to allow her out of their sight."¹⁸ All the travel was to be by night, so as to avoid both casual passersby, and more deliberate anarchist attentions.

Louise Michel and her mother had a very affectionate meeting, reported the guards who duly returned her, following instructions to the letter, to the prison-van officials responsible for delivering her back to Clermont. The delivery of this package,

as of any other, was solemnized with an official receipt, dated September 1, 1883.¹⁹

An affectionate meeting? Well, policemen have never been selected for their psychological subtlety. Marianne was overwhelmed by the visit and later, full of remorse for what she felt had been her disagreeable behaviour during it. She wrote Louise: "Just like you, I'm still quite stunned, quite knocked off balance. To think that I behaved like such a shrew, wasting the precious few minutes you were able to give me. Please forgive me. Should there be a next time, I'll not scold you then. You know, despite all that, I love you very much."²⁰

Louise worried that her mother was hiding something in these letters. "It's as if she's afraid that somebody will take offence," she wrote Vaughan.²¹ Louise also feared that her mother might yet learn she was not in Saint-Lazare. "We must protect her from such a heavy blow," she wrote a well-intentioned friend.²² She wrote Vaughan: "The slightest disturbance could kill *maman*, by revealing to her that I'm not in Saint-Lazare."²³ And so the courageous deception went on, Louise spinning fantasies for Marianne about her idyllic stay in a model prison. She talked about the curtains at her window, about her stove...²⁴ She had a geranium cutting sent to the old woman.²⁵ "Where on earth do you get all these lovely things you send me?" marvelled Marianne. "It seems you're the princess of Saint-Lazare, with chicken, wine and fruit at your disposal..."²⁶

Marianne also talked about the servants who came and went from her life. And about the cat: "I may be used to the smell of that cat, but the servants aren't so long-suffering."²⁷ The doctor said Marianne needed pure air, so the cat was to be "sent to the hospital." Protested an aunt: "I couldn't allow your mother to be sacrificed to the love you have for a sick cat. Heap your curses on my head if you must, but leave your mother alone..." The letter grew even sterner in tone: "I must ask you not to write your mother any more of those inexcusable letters about the cat..." Louise would do better to take the money she was spending on stamps for such letters and give it to the poor. "But instead, you put your cat ahead of human charity."²⁸ Even Marianne joined the argument: "I'm tired of hearing about your cats. They huddle around the fire, some of them curled up in baskets and the others on the stool."²⁹ To top it all off, Henriette (the servant) had let one of them give her the slip. "Please don't let her lose my Caledonian cats," begged Louise.³⁰

Sometimes Marianne's protests aimed higher than domestic trivia. "I think you could have served me and other people much better had you become a great stage actress, for which you have all the talents, rather than an *artiste* of revolution. I detest that revolution and everything associated with it. But for that, you would still be at my side."³¹ The two women's complete inability to understand each other was as great as their love. Sometimes, though, Marianne softened her criticism: "I could have had many other things to give me pain. Apart from your revolutionary activities, which I deplore and always shall, I have never had any cause to blush on your account."³²

Louise's friends didn't forget her. Rochefort, the faithful: "I haven't written because they said you could only receive letters from your immediate family. But I am told, my excellent friend, that you are well-behaved, that you see nobody and that you eat just enough to prevent death by starvation. Write me, I beg you, to reassure me as to your fate or at least your means of existence. Is it true that you are allowed to spend up to 25 centimes a day, above your ration of prison food which, as I know from experience, counts for nothing at all since prison administrations allot 10 centimes per prison head and stomach." Then, generous as always, he opened his purse: "But, above all, don't let yourself go short of money. I think you still have some left. Shall I send you some more? How much?" She was not to worry about her mother, she could count on him. And should anything happen to him, "one of my friends, the Marquis de Talleyrand-Périgord, the staunchest of republicans, has promised to assume responsibility for your mother and to see that she always has a more than ample living allowance."³³

Still, he was annoyed that Louise continued to give away everything he sent her. His money ricocheted: Louise sent it right back out again in the form of flowers, fruit, cakes and other gifts for her wondering mother. Vaughan took his turn at reasoning with Louise: "Rochefort has most particularly instructed me to tell you that if you stop sending back, under a variety of pretexts, the money which you should be using to improve your own material conditions, then we shall see that you are never in want. My dear Louise, I know the generosity which guides your behaviour, but you must force yourself to subordinate heart to reason." She was not to worry about her mother: "Rochefort, a few other friends and I together ensure that she receives 100 francs a month, over and above her rent

money.”³⁴

Louise thanked Rochefort with a needlepoint cushion, which she had worked for him in her long solitary hours. He thanked her for the gift, but went on: “I’m absolutely furious with you. I know that everything you receive is immediately spent on your entourage of leeches. All you’re doing is encouraging their worst instincts. [Louise thought men fundamentally good, and society responsible for what they became.] You have nothing yourself, but nobody dares send you anything since you’d immediately give it away.” He would have liked to bypass Louise and pay the Clermont director an allowance with which to ensure her a food supplement, but regulations forbade it.³⁵ So, her friends had no choice but to beg her to be reasonable. Rochefort had no illusions, of course; he remembered the barefoot woman on the decks of *La Virginie*.

Louise was also in touch with M. Fayet, a remaining link with her youth. “I sat down to answer your letter as soon as I received it,” he wrote, “and, as usual, I shall preach a bit. I’m quite aware that my sermons so far haven’t had much effect but since I’m also praying to the good Lord to shine upon you and bring you back to the true path, I shall continue to preach. I cannot believe that a person who had the benefit of such a proper upbringing, morally and spiritually beyond reproach, is now lost forever...” He reminded her of her religious poetry and of the very favourable impression she had made both in Audeloncourt and Millières. In those days, she had written him: “I have moments of despair and doubt, but whatever the story of my soul, I would enter a convent with great joy. I’ll go farther: I think I shall die wearing the veil.” The old rector continued, “The more I study your past and present conduct and the more I reflect upon the events of your life, why, the more convinced I am that the active yet regulated life of a teaching nun was your true vocation.” Intelligence, morality, charity, celibacy: she had all the qualities for the religious life. She did lack humility, but she would surely have gained that through prayer. And had she not written to him so long ago: “I use irony to mask the tears. That may be due to a great defect, pride.”³⁶

Ample food for thought. But Louise was no longer interested in her soul: her soul had fused with the Revolution. She did not look upon prison as an opportunity to mend her ways, or choose a new path. She spent her time writing stories and novels which, she hoped, would earn enough money to pay

off her debts. *Les Microbes humains*, *Le Gars Yvon*, *La Misère*, *Les Méprisés* — she thought these books were realistic analyses of society, though they were really nothing more than showcases for her riotous imagination.

Louise sat within her four walls, writing *Les Microbes humains*, and thinking constantly of her mother. She had several times asked for permission to visit Marianne again, but it had consistently been refused. On February 5, 1884, however, the director of penitentiary administration wrote the police prefect: "Louise Michel informs us that her mother is at the point of death. She begs most urgently that we permit her one last visit. I am informed that the sick woman believes her daughter to be in Paris and has not been disabused of this notion for fear that her grief at the separation would kill her. She is therefore in the greatest despair over the fact that she will not be allowed to embrace her daughter before dying. Given these circumstances, you can understand the scruples which make it difficult for me to refuse the request. As I believe the situation to be urgent, I request that you inform me immediately should you have any objection to your following the same procedures this time as last..."³⁷ The prefect replied the next day (by "extremely urgent" delivery) to say he had no objections.³⁸ Louise was accordingly transferred to Paris on the evening of February 6, just as she had been the previous August.³⁹ After visiting her mother, she spent the rest of that night in Saint-Lazare. "Louise Michel, whom I saw upon her arrival here, was very much affected by the condition in which she found her mother," wrote the director of Saint-Lazare to the police prefect.⁴⁰ She was returned to Clermont.

The above correspondence seems to bear witness to a very much more humane age than our own. In this, as in so many other things, the twentieth century has seen a definite regression.

It was quite true that Louise Michel was, in all ways, an exceptional prisoner. The director of Clermont came to admire her, just as the director of Saint-Lazare had done. "Her health is not very good," he wrote to the minister of the Interior. "Her conduct is exemplary, irreproachable on every level. I have nothing but praise for the extreme dignity of her behaviour. The great, constant affection which she bears her mother marks her as an extremely interesting person, and one worthy of the greatest indulgence."⁴¹

Louise Michel continued to make news in the outside world. News vendors announced her death. The police wondered about laying charges, since the story was untrue.⁴² Others said that she was seriously ill and that the government was hushing it up.⁴³ Then there was the publication of a fascinating, if fraudulent, document by "X" entitled, "Divine Revelations to Louise Michel in Her Prison Cell." "Whatever may be the name by which you know me, be it Brahma, Vishnu, Jehovah, Allah, Jesus; I seek pure hearts... The priests enslave and deceive you..."⁴⁴ At the other extreme, there was a tableau which showed her carousing at the Folies-Bergère, while *La Bataille* reporters whistled down the actors and fought the resident toughs, all this under the impassive eye of the forces of law and order.⁴⁵ Some young people caught trying to grab a copy of the poster were "sharply questioned" and then sent on their way.⁴⁶ Louise aroused interest as far away as Austria, where some students in the Viennese polytechnical school apparently published a history of her life.⁴⁷

Rumours flew that both Kropotkin and Louise Michel would be pardoned on July 14. *L'Intransigeant* was not impressed: "It is unacceptable that the government should even consider pardoning some, but not all, of the political prisoners. It would be a disgraceful act of injustice, and the first to protest it would be those who were pardoned." Anyway, the goal was amnesty, not pardon.⁴⁸ July 14 came and went, however, with no pardon for the imprisoned anarchists.

Once again, on August 29, Louise was taken to Paris in order to visit her mother.⁴⁹ Her wildly romantic nature must have rather enjoyed these nocturnal trips: powerful personalities have a way of surrounding themselves with the climate they crave. Some months later Louise, who had no access to any sources of news, somehow became convinced that Paris was struck with cholera. Horrified, she begged the president of the Republic himself to allow her to return to Saint-Lazare. Her letter was pathetic, almost incoherent, her anguish obvious: "Since nobody else seems to realize that, under the circumstances, my place is there [Paris], even if in the darkest subterranean dungeon, I address myself to you: you treat me as an enemy of the State, but you should remember that I surrendered myself to the judges, and act accordingly in my case..."⁵⁰ This was followed several days later by a calmer letter to the minister of the Interior: "I have no one but my mother. If my words could be

heard, even my cruellest enemies would ask that I be granted an immediate transfer to Paris, given the circumstances of the moment, for there are now two reasons why she may be taken from me at any moment. I am not asking for visits or letters, wherever you may send me. I won't even be granted external visiting privileges, if you so rule, but at least I would be in Paris, breathing the same air, and my mother would know I was there. [Does this mean that Marianne had finally learned that Louise was held in Clermont? Or is it just an extra touching flourish, designed to win the minister's pity?] But she can only know such joy if she is alive, and I am there."⁵¹ Marianne herself tried to calm Louise. It was her last letter, and a touching one: "My dear girl, do not be so anxious, I am no worse. The only thing that grieves me is that you worry so much." She sent Louise some embroidery silks. "Your last tapestry was not as good as the others. I can see that you are unhappy but that is very foolish of you. Don't knit any more clothes for me, I have enough, I need nothing more. Too much money is being spent on me." And, one last time, "Don't torment yourself like this. I embrace you with all my heart."⁵²

At the beginning of December, Marianne's condition suddenly worsened. Clemenceau, who in his own way was just as watchful as Rochefort, immediately telegraphed the minister of the Interior: "Mother Louise Michel worse. Beg you instantly arrange external visit as you promised could be arranged."⁵³ He wrote to Herbet, the director of the penitentiary service and to Camescasse, the police prefect: "Please hurry, there is greatest urgency."⁵⁴

For once, the administrative machinery moved quickly. Louise was brought to Paris that same day, December 4.⁵⁵ She was absolutely frantic at Marianne's illness and before returning once again to Clermont, asked the special superintendent at the Gare du Nord to forward the following letter to the minister of the Interior: "In the name of your own mother, I beg you to leave me here in Paris for a few days, whether in Saint-Lazare or some other prison you think more suitable. My mother has too little time left to be denied the comfort of my presence here in Paris for these, her last days" (sent "Express, Personal").⁵⁶ On December 8, from Clermont, Louise pleaded with the minister once again: "She is all I have in the world. This is the last favour she will ever ask of me."⁵⁷ Clemenceau interceded both with the minister and with the president of the Republic: "If you wish to

allow Mme Michel to give her daughter one last embrace before she dies, there is no time to lose."⁵⁸

Grudgingly, and under pressure from the president himself, the minister of the Interior gave way. His director wrote the police prefect: "My dear friend, yet another chapter in the saga of Louise Michel. I beg you to understand that we do not lay this burden upon your shoulders for our own pleasure. The president of the Republic has a fixed desire to see the prisoner transferred provisionally to a Paris prison so as to be taken to visit her dying mother..." With all necessary precautions, of course.⁵⁹ M. Camescasse obeyed, but with equally little grace: "I feel obliged to point out to you, *monsieur le ministre*, that had I been consulted in this matter, I should not have thought it necessary to accede to this request which is of long standing and, as far as I am concerned, doubtful necessity."⁶⁰

Graciously or not, Louise was returned to Paris on December 8.⁶¹ She was first taken to visit her mother and then to Saint-Lazare, where she arrived in a state of despair bordering on mental derangement. "She thought she could hear voices crying out the news of her mother's death," wrote the director of Saint-Lazare. "I assure you, at this moment politics is the last thing on her mind."⁶² Distressed, shaken, Louise wrote yet again to the president of the Republic and to the minister of the Interior, asking a final favour: "This letter will be long and rambling. I am in the grips of too great anxiety... Please, I beg you, allow me parole for the few days that remain to my mother: my presence might even give her a few extra days of life... In exchange for an act of such goodness, rather than dying myself (as I would like to do), I would try to dedicate my entire remaining life to scientific missions, either in New Caledonia, where I could be very useful in the schools, or in mission posts among the tribes of Africa. P.S. If she is already dead, please allow me to see her once again. I could bear it."⁶³

Louise, naturally, felt grief over her mother's impending death, but the paroxysms that shook her may have been the result of something more: a nagging, underlying sense of guilt. Had she not always subordinated her mother's needs to the needs of the Revolution? And now, it was too late.

M. Camescasse finally softened. He gave Louise permission to stay with her mother, under the watchful guard of two police inspectors.⁶⁴ The minister of the Interior thought he had gone too far: "Can this parole be prolonged without unfortunate

consequences?" What precautions had been taken, he wanted to know, to avoid incidents?⁶⁵ Might not Rochefort and his friends storm the house and attempt to free Louise? Not even six agents could hold off such an attack, it would take at least double or triple that number. Guarding that house would be a very heavy responsibility, concluded the police superintendent, who was the one who had to shoulder it.⁶⁶

But poor Louise was hardly thinking about escape. She thanked the police prefect for his consideration: "A thousand thanks, on behalf of my poor mother. Alas, they seem already to be crying her death in the streets. Even if it's true, I would be no less grateful to you, for I shall be able to see her one last time."⁶⁷ The next day, December 12, she — and the two guards — were installed at Marianne's bedside, while a third guard paced the street outside.⁶⁸ Rochefort's son came to pay his respects, and Clemenceau sent forty francs to cover household expenses.⁶⁹ On the morning of the 13th, Louise fell into what seemed to be a state of utter mental collapse. She kept repeating that the funeral hearse was already at the door and that they were trying to take her mother away and bury her alive. She ran to the window and then back to her paralyzed mother, begging her to rise and seat herself in the armchair so she could be seen by the crowd gathered on the street. Clemenceau arrived about two o'clock, managed to calm her a little and gave her a sleeping potion.⁷⁰ Two relatives arrived, who tended both mother and daughter. In fact, the guards themselves doubled as nurses and did what they could for the two sick women.⁷¹

For the next few days, Louise alternated between calm reason and hallucination. She continued to see the hearse and one night armed herself with a poker, so as to defend her mother from the hearse and herself from those who wanted to take her back to Clermont.⁷²

Tongues wagged in the cafe downstairs. The owner complained about the detectives stationed on the street. Bad for business, she said, customers were leaving. The agents argued that they were not in uniform and that they hadn't mentioned their occupation to anybody. Her husband replied that he and his clients knew a policeman when they saw one. And so, to avoid upsetting anybody, the agents moved to another cafe and conducted their surveillance from there.⁷³ They were on the alert, because they had heard there was an anarchist plot afoot to free Louise.⁷⁴

Suddenly, her old nemesis appeared. M. Andrieux, the former police prefect, took exception to this "joke of a prisoner," who had kept the papers busy for the last six months "taking note of her peregrinations, describing her promenades and the impressions she brings back from each trip." He took exception to the life this woman was being allowed to live, "for, as far as the administration is concerned, this situation, if prolonged, will seriously weaken the very principle on which the penal system is built... It is high time we put an end to this detention-at-large." Louise's friends replied, courtesy of *La Bataille*, savaging both the article and "tiger-cat" Andrieux himself. Their description of the man must bear some likeness to the original: "His veiled eyes, his languid gestures, his poses, his hesitant footsteps, everything about him speaks of repulsive hysteria." With "feminine cruelty," M. Andrieux demanded that Louise either be subjected to solitary confinement, or set free. "He writhes with pleasure in his own baseness."⁷⁵

Marianne died at 4 a.m., January 3, 1885. Louise seemed to take it calmly, but Dr. Fiaux recommended that she be kept under observation in case she should attempt suicide.⁷⁶ Clemenceau, Rochefort and Vaughan made all the arrangements and then suggested that she allow them to have her transferred to a nursing home. She refused: her mother was dead and she needed nothing further. Her only request now was that she be allowed to serve out her sentence in Saint-Lazare. The unwearying Clemenceau brought this to the attention of the president of the Republic.⁷⁷ Rochefort used the columns of *L'Intransigeant* to publicize Louise's current nervous state. "We had promised not to reveal this painful situation, but we cannot allow executioners to pose as benefactors." Louise had been spared the crowded conditions of the local jail, true, but she had been subjected instead "to the monstrous isolation of solitary confinement. Few men can bear it, and the brain of a woman is not fashioned to withstand it at all." (Women really were the weaker sex, for Rochefort.) He knew what he was talking about; he himself had done six months of solitary. Ten other prisoners, on the same regime, had gone mad. "The system of solitary confinement amounts to the re-introduction of torture." Always the good polemicist, he attacked Waldeck-Rousseau. What it pleased the minister of the Interior to call a favour was, in fact, Louise's death warrant. Was there no doctor in Clermont? Couldn't he see the state of the woman's

mind? Waldeck-Rousseau was fully aware of the situation, charged Rochefort, and he permitted it to grow worse because he intended to authorize an act of supposedly very great generosity as soon as Louise was no longer capable of benefitting from it. "She was sentenced to the loss of liberty for six years, not for life." The plan, Rochefort explained, was eventually to send her to a nursing home. Very gracious. As gracious as the way Mac-Mahon had posthumously pardoned all the deportees who died in New Caledonia.⁷⁸

Marianne's funeral service was held on January 5, but Louise did not have permission to attend. She placed a few mementos in the casket: a photograph of herself, a lock of her hair tied with black ribbon, a bouquet of red Everlastings from Marie Ferré's funeral, a portrait of Théophile Ferré and a few other flowers.⁷⁹ Even if Louise did not believe in any form of life after death, she still made her humble offerings to the dead woman's shades. Then she was taken back to Saint-Lazare. As they stepped out of the building onto Boul. Ornano, she asked permission to take a few steps on the pavement, it was so long since she had had that pleasure. Clemenceau and Rochefort walked with her.⁸⁰

Marianne's body was to be removed at 11 o'clock.⁸¹ The police had taken steps to guarantee that the funeral service (a civil service, despite the old lady's piety) went "without incident." The anarchists had already decided to make no gesture at all, since it might compromise Louise's chance for a pardon.⁸² *L'Intransigeant*, *La Bataille* and *La Libre Pensée* all sent floral wreaths. Louise's own offering was a wreath of black pearls. The procession was led by one of her uncles, accompanied by his two daughters. Behind them walked Rochefort, Vaughan and the entire editorial board from *L'Intransigeant*. They in turn were followed by some of the old Communards, Eudes, Vaillant, Lissagaray. Some young revolutionaries carried red flags. Then came some workers and some women. More people joined the cortège at every street corner. The procession route was Boulevards Ney, Bessières, Berthier and the Courcelles gate to Levallois-Perret cemetery.

The police were invisible, but active. Republican Guards had been deployed along Rue Ordener and city policemen had each been assigned their posts. An entire infantry battalion, fully kilted, waited in the Pépinière Barracks for orders to march.

From time to time, somebody in the funeral procession would cry out, "Long live the Commune! Long live the Social Revolution!" The anticipated "incident" took place on Boul. Berthier. A policeman tried to make the marchers drop their red flags. Rochefort protested: "This is provocation. Everything until this moment has taken place in perfect order. Your intervention is misplaced." "I have formal instructions not to permit the use of the red flag." "Those flags are the private property of associations which have the perfect right to choose any colour they like for their banners. Furthermore, some red flags followed Gambetta's coffin, and nobody said a word about that."

The policeman went to the head of the procession and tried to split it in two by closing the Asnières gates. The sheer press of the crowd, however, forced them open. A train went by: travellers waved their hats.

Five thousand people entered the cemetery. Ernest Roche, from *L'Intransigeant*, spoke of Marianne's simple goodness, and the fact that her daughter's imprisonment had made her, too, a martyr. Everybody who knew the two women knew how devoted they had been to each other. Let all revolutionaries now join hands over this tomb, which was Ferré's tomb as well, and swear "the pact of danger, vengeance and justice!" Chabert exalted the unity of all socialists, who might differ on means but had one common goal. Digeon, for the anarchists, entered a small *caveat*: "Let all revolutionaries ally themselves with each other, but let this be an alliance of absolute liberty, with no hidden agenda." Somebody else declared that they must seek neither pardon nor amnesty. To which Rochefort retorted: "Only one category of citizens has the right to that viewpoint: the prisoners themselves."

So there was far from perfect harmony among the different revolutionary groups. But the person who would have felt least in harmony with it all was poor old Marianne herself, who had grown so weary of everything associated with this revolution she had never embraced. A corpse, though, is always the best of all pretexts for some politicking.⁸³

Louise was put in room number 3 in Saint-Lazare. It was the infirmary (which she had once already occupied) and it made quite a change from her cell in Clermont. The room was quite large, with a stove, table and two beds. A friend, Mme Durosset, had been given permission to remain with Louise for

a few days. Louise was crushed, feverish. Her feet were so swollen the prison doctor did not think she would be able to get out of bed in the morning.⁸⁴ She cried all night. "I saw her this morning," wrote the director, "and I found her much altered."⁸⁵

Then she seemed to rally: she wrote letters, sorted documents, asked for some historical and scientific books from the prison library.⁸⁶ But it was all superficial. "Now everything is truly finished. Now that you are dead, nothing (unless it's the Revolution) matters to me anymore, except perhaps to join you in your sleep. My heart is a stone."⁸⁷ And, "What difference would death make? It would be a deliverance. Am I not already dead?"⁸⁸ And, "Despite everything, I remained young until the death of my mother. I think I had a youthful heart. But from that day on, it has not one drop of blood."⁸⁹ Now that it was too late, too late for anything; now that she could erase nothing, change nothing; now, finally, she understood the total sacrifice that had been Marianne's life. She wept: "She would have liked us to live together in some quiet corner of the countryside, near some village school lost in the woods..."⁹⁰ She recalled the days that had been so happy for her, even though, at the time, she had not fully appreciated them.

*Vroncourt avait des rouges roses
Au coeur plein de poussière d'or.
En été, par milliers écloses
O Roses, je vous vois encore...*

But her mother, who had loved them so, was dead:

*Elle n'en verra plus jamais...*⁹¹

Théophile, Marie, her mother, all dead, all part of the lengthening list that each one of us accumulates as we grow older:

*Marie avait fermé tes pages, O mon livre.
Ma mère me restait, morte aussi comme nous tous.
Le monde est un désert et pourtant il faut vivre...*

Peace was not for them, nor happiness:

*Pour nous tous aujourd'hui, toute joie est un leurre...
O tant mieux, il faudra plus vite que l'on meure.
Le coursier doit périr pour que parvienne à l'heure
Le rouge cavalier vengeur.*⁹²

She received many expressions of sympathy,⁹³ some were personal letters, but others came from a whole range of

organizations — the republican circle of Toulon, the Free Thought group of Rouen, the socialist study and propaganda circle of Le Havre, the atheist socialist group of the fourteenth arrondissement...⁹⁴ One postcard compared her to Joan of Arc: "Your great heart has bled for the misery of the people."⁹⁵

Her friends, in their various ways, continued to watch over her. The anarchists apparently planned to blow up the prison gates in an effort to set her free. (The director of Saint-Lazare anxiously doubled the guard.⁹⁶) Well-meaning friends continued to press for her pardon, to Louise's horror. She wrote the president of the Republic (Clemenceau as letter-bearer), thanking him for having allowed her to be with her mother in her last days. She also tried to make him understand what her friends were seemingly incapable of understanding: "It would be cruel and dishonest to offer me a pardon simply because my mother is dead." The authorities had already been taken in by a request for clemency sent to Waldeck-Rousseau with her forged signature at the bottom: "I ask that everybody who believed that document be informed of the truth and my name cleared of that cowardice." (Even Clemenceau had thought it authentic.) While in prison, she could work, she could write, but if given her freedom: "I don't know I could bear the thought that it came too late for her [Marianne]... Please leave me alone, in my prison cell."⁹⁷

Or, send her back to New Caledonia, to the Melanesians to whom she had already promised a school. And so she wrote to the minister of the Interior: "I haven't the heroism required to stay in France now that my mother is dead. I am indebted to you for my time with her at the end; I could cancel that debt by running a school for the tribes of New Caledonia. Please allow me to serve the rest of my sentence there, working to establish such a school. I ask you to send me on one of the first boats available." She pointed out they could check her teaching credentials with M. Fayet, former rector of Haute-Marne, Mlle Royer, her superior at the school in Chaumont and M. de Fleurville, the former inspector of schools for Montmartre. She wrote as well to M. Simon, the mayor of Noumea, who had once hired her to teach music and drawing.⁹⁸ Marianne, at this point, had been dead for a mere ten days. All this activity on Louise's part demonstrated not only her usual abundant energy but an unusual (for her) degree of practicality in setting about one of her objectives.

M. Fayet rejoiced in this project. The New Caledonian school would be a tranquil setting for Louise, "after fifteen years of turmoil... I was most anxious about your future in France," he continued. "I really couldn't see any tenable position for you. The prejudice against you is such that every time I mention your name with even a trace of sympathy in my voice, people practically cross themselves for protection against this hypocrite who now stands unmasked before them as an impious revolutionary." He spoke again of her devout childhood and assured her that *curés* Simon and Renaud (who had been her parish priest in Audeloncourt) were surely watching over her now from their places in heaven. Let her then meditate, while in prison and "far from revolutionary provocation." He was always ready to help her in any way that lay within his power.⁹⁹

But it did not please the minister of the Interior to permit Louise to resume teaching, not even if her students were only "Kanakas" — perhaps especially if they were Kanakas — and her letter went unanswered.¹⁰⁰

Imprisonment was a much more pleasant affair in Saint-Lazare than it had been in Clermont. She could receive visitors and did, inevitably Clemenceau, Rochefort and many others as well. Clemenceau arrived one day and offered her 100 francs from the president of the Republic, M. Grévy. Louise refused the gift with dignity.¹⁰¹

She worked daily, and day-long, at her *Mémoires* and some novels.¹⁰² The authorities even permitted her to keep the cats with her and, once she'd tamed the rats, she fed the two sets of animals together. Truly, a scene worthy of St. Francis of Assisi — unless, of course, it never existed outside the lively imagination of her friends at *L'Intransigeant*. This altogether golden legend was rounded out with the reminder that she always distributed her gift packages to others, paying special attention to the children (children under the age of three were not separated from their inmate-mothers.)¹⁰³

A huge lithograph of Louise was now on sale, price 65 centimes. The anarcho-communist newspaper, *L'Audace*, listed her name as one of their collaborators. Louise knew nothing of her supposed involvement with *L'Audace*: the director of Saint-Lazare found it just as well to intercept certain types of newspapers.¹⁰⁴

And still, people talked of a pardon. Rochefort mocked the

government's supposed good intentions. "Louise is a fine woman and we all love her. The authorities are amazed to discover that her life is so hard. When she has but fifteen minutes to live they will, with brimming eyes, grant her pardon." The truth was, government was afraid of her: "Dead? Fine. Free? Never."¹⁰⁵ Anyway, all the political prisoners should be pardoned, not just Louise.¹⁰⁶ "Ditherers!" he cried.¹⁰⁷

Louise continued to fight the whole idea, on principle. She wrote Lissagaray, the only one who seemed to understand her motivation: "Thank you. You seem to understand that I can't honourably accept a pardon to which I have no more right than any of the others. They must pardon all of us, or none of us. I will not buy myself freedom with my mother's body." She was only sorry that she hadn't left for Russia or Germany when there was still time: "There, they kill the revolutionaries, they don't dishonour them." And again, "I wish people would leave me in peace."¹⁰⁸ Her attitude won enthusiastic praise from the German paper, *Freiheit*: "This woman could teach many men the meaning of perseverance, courage and loyalty to principles."¹⁰⁹

The month of May brought another death, that of Victor Hugo, her "kindred soul," her "beloved brother" from Vroncourt days. (He perhaps still was, if we are to believe the poet's ledger of intimate accounts.) It was a death of State, with State mourning. "I constantly sent him verses, until my return from New Caledonia. Then there was no more need, the Master was being fêted by everybody, including those who once had behaved in quite the opposite fashion. I didn't need to be there in the good times."¹¹⁰ Hugo had become the Republic's official poet, that bourgeois republic whose peace Louise so consistently disturbed. The final touch, for Louise, was the news that the funeral address was to be delivered by Maxime Du Camp, member of the French Academy and author of one of the most virulently anti-Communard books in print, *Les Convulsions de Paris*.

Louise therefore sat down and wrote her own homage to Hugo and borrowed one of his lines, "You may strike this man with tranquility," for her own purposes:

*Aux survivants de Mai; dans la grande hécatombe,
Il offrit sa maison; aujourd'hui sur sa tombe,
C'est Maxime Du Camp.*

*Du Camp de Satory qui prendra la parole...
Pourquoi, pour saluer ce barde au Capitole
Un front marqué de sang?*

*De ce sang des vaincus, qui fit horreur au Maître,
Non pas dans les combats, mais après, comme un traître,
Comme à la chasse un chien
Fait lever le gibier, ce mouchard volontaire,
Six ans nous l'avons vu pour les conseils de guerre
Chasser au citoyen.*

She had forgotten nothing, not "Galliffet the hangman," not the names of the members of the Commission of Pardons which had sealed Ferré's fate. Maxime Du Camp was "the man whom one may strike with tranquility." And she hoped that

*Le peuple jettera, fêtu dans la tourmente
Le sinistre histrion...
Qu'il aille sous le vent terrible des colères
Sous le vent qui dans l'air fait craquer nos bannières
Qu'il aille, ce haillon...¹¹¹*

And she recalled Hugo's own verse, written upon the defeat of the Commune, which she had scratched on the rocks of New Caledonia:

*Escobar rit d'un rire oblique.
On voit traîner, sur toi, géante République,
Tous les sabres de Lilliput.
Le juge, marchant en simarre,
Vend la loi.
Lazare! Lazare! Lazare!
Lève-toi!*

"May this verse, O Master, drop its petals upon your tomb..."¹¹² And so Louise bade farewell to Victor Hugo.

By now she had finished her *Mémoires* and hoped they would earn enough for her to repay Rochefort. The publishing house, Roy, was unwilling to print them as they stood, and Louise insisted that an intrigue of some sort lay behind this reluctance.¹¹³ Even in prison she was being exploited — Béatrix Excoffon, for example, her old comrade from Commune days, was forever asking her for money. Louise no longer trusted her: "Vipers such as she have spread more slander about me than all my enemies combined." Some of her manuscripts had been stolen; her atlases, worth more than 3,000 francs, had been the object of an unsuccessful burglary at Mme Keva's home.¹¹⁴

Despite all this, she continued to try and help others. She urged upon Vaughan, a "realistic, true-life" novel by Gregorieff, the director of the Russian library from whom she wanted to take Russian lessons.¹¹⁵ The Saint-Lazare reception room had become virtually Louise's office for "job placement and charitable endeavours."¹¹⁶

There was some talk of nominating her as a candidate in the next elections, for Maria Desraimes, Léonie Rouzade and Mme Edmond Adam were drawing up a list of female (and therefore illegal) candidates. Louise, however, had not budged from the position she took in the days of M. Andrieux's *Révolution sociale*. They therefore informed her friends, through the pages of *La Bataille*: "Dear *citoyennes*, you know very well that I am not the sort of woman to be a candidate. Please, I beg you, remove my name from your list, even though you undoubtedly put it there as a mark of your friendship. I do not believe that the presence of a few women in the Chamber would do anything to raise the risible salaries that are paid to women, or to keep society's victims from being bounced back and forth between the streets and prison." Each person must fight with the weapon he thinks best "and the ballot box will never be my choice."¹¹⁷

Other friends were now asking that the prison authorities permit her to attend the transfer of her mother's body to the vault which had just been purchased for it. But Louise had had enough of people "begging" on her behalf: "Must I keep drumming it into their ears that there is now nobody left on the outside to die of sorrow at my absence, and that I shall never leave here before the others, not even for a visit."¹¹⁸

Emile Gautier had accepted a pardon? That was his business. "Let him now fight for amnesty for us all. If not, he no longer belongs to the Revolution." Her own answer to questions of pardon would always be *no*.¹¹⁹

Paul Lafargue (Karl Marx's son-in-law) came one day that September to interview her for *Le Socialiste*. "But what's wrong with you?" she asked him smilingly: "You look upset. Does the sight of a prison bother you that much?" He answered, "I wasn't expecting to talk to you through bars. I thought I'd be able to see you in your own room, shake your hand..." "My dear Lafargue, in this particular hotel where the bourgeoisie is kind enough to offer me free room and board, there is no other reception room."

And she began to sing Saint-Lazare's praises, her haven,

her cloister. Saint-Lazare gave her a happiness she had never known when free. As a teacher, she had had fifty students under her care, three-quarters of whom never paid their fees, and she was obliged to teach evening lessons as well. "I'd have given years of my life to have some time to study." Saint-Lazare gave her that time. She was studying English and Russian, because "I must know several languages for the work I wish to take up when I leave prison." She was doing a great deal of writing — children's stories, her memoirs, novels which presented "a realistic picture of life's miseries." (We shall consider her brand of Socialist Realism a little later.)

"I am really much more liberated than people who are out there walking around under the open sky. They are the prisoners of their thoughts, shackled by their possessions, their greed, their pitiful necessities of life. They're so preoccupied they can't live as true human beings, thinking human beings." In today's vocabulary, they were "alienated"... "But here, I live the life of the whole world." She relived her trips for Lafargue: the Melanesian songs, the Antarctic snowstorms. Perhaps one day she'd go back to New Caledonia and found a school; she'd had a letter from the mayor of Noumea on that very subject.

"Oh, how we need you!" exclaimed Lafargue. "I don't want a pardon," she replied. The argument pitted realistic Marxist against idealistic anarchism. "It's not a pardon, to make the government restore the liberty which it stole from you by force," he said. "A revolutionary must not recognize the bourgeoisie's right to convict him. He may have to yield before the crushing weight that bourgeoisie can bring to bear, but he never gives up his rights. If the bourgeois government throws open his prison doors, it's not a 'pardon', it's simply the restoration of the liberty to which he is entitled. He should get restitution as well... I've just finished eight months in prison myself, and I fully intend to be paid, damages plus interest, when the Revolution comes... Think what you could do for the Revolution if you were free," he concluded, in a final effort to convince her.

But this pragmatic sort of argument was irrelevant to a woman who was guided by a romantic and feudal concept of personal "honour." "I'll leave prison only if there is an amnesty. Let all those who love me never again mention the word 'pardon.' The subject dishonours me. Don't forget to

bring me that book you have by Darwin, *The Descent of Man*. It will help my English. Goodbye, *au revoir*.”¹²⁰

“No pardon,” she said once again, her perpetual refrain, this time (December 28) to the police prefect. Those who ask for pardon “may be as cowardly as they like on their own behalf, but they have no right to ask pardon for others. People should have the decency to leave me in peace. It seems there’s no end to it.”¹²¹ And there wasn’t: on January 8, the president of the Republic signed pardons for Louise Michel, Kropotkin and a few others.¹²² Louise was absolutely furious. “I see no reason to insult me in this fashion. I declare once again that I shall not leave this place until everybody leaves.”¹²³ And then she threw out the bizarre accusation that M. Grévy was trying to “revive the Empire.”¹²⁴

It appeared they were going to have to throw her out bodily. It was an agonizing thought for those who’d have to find a way to enforce this particular pardon. Telegram from the minister of the Interior to the director of Saint-Lazare: “Extreme urgency. Liberate Louise Michel immediately... I need hardly remind you, in case of opposition from the interested party, that the pardon constitutes legal termination of her sentence and that, accordingly, her continued presence in prison would be a case of arbitrary detention and violation of the law by the government and the prison administration. If, despite careful explanation, she still refuses to yield, then as a last resort she is to be removed from the establishment.”¹²⁵ To which the harrassed director replied: “Louise Michel, to whom I have communicated this decision, refuses to leave. What am I to do? I send you my protestation.”¹²⁶ He tried to reason with her, tried to persuade her. In vain. Then the principal private secretary to the police prefect appeared, to try his luck.

“Oh, very well,” she said. “This is turning into a farce. I refuse to make a spectacle of myself and amuse the comics. But understand this: I do not consider myself to have been pardoned, and I shall behave exactly as I choose.”¹²⁷

But another problem arose. How could Louise Michel leave prison? She hadn’t a centime to her name. “May I order the police superintendent to provide her with the necessities so that we may return her to Levallois-Perret?” the principal private secretary asked his police prefect.¹²⁸ Late that afternoon, the director of Saint-Lazare had a fiacre summoned to the courtyard and asked the driver to take Louise Michel to 89

Route d'Asnière (since named Rue Victor Hugo) in Levallois-Perret. One of the municipal councillors, M. Charles Moise, had readied a small apartment for her.¹²⁹ Her friend and prison visitor, Mme Durosset, went with her.¹³⁰ The doors of Saint-Lazare were finally able to shut behind Louise Michel. They'd had almost as much trouble getting her out as they had had getting her in.

XIV - POLITICS AND LITERATURE

And so Louise was installed in a two-room apartment, furnished with her mother's meagre possessions. The bedroom contained a bed, a chest of drawers, a night table and two chairs. The "sitting room" held an old walnut piano, two battered trunks and a round table. *Le Figaro* described it as "primitive," but Louise had never paid any attention to material comfort.

She brooded about the fact that she and Kropotkin had been pardoned, while Pouget and the Montceau miners were still behind bars. She was weary and disgusted, even with her friends (Rochefort and the *Cri du Peuple* and *La Bataille* editorial teams) whom she thought responsible for her pardon. "Is there no honesty left anywhere on earth? Men are either downtrodden wretches, or cowards."

She wanted to go away — New Caledonia, Russia, anywhere at all. As soon as her mother was resting in her vault, she would leave.¹ She sent a new protest to *Le Cri du Peuple*,² but "written protest is a pallid affair." *La Bataille* wanted to organize a banquet in her honour, but she said she wouldn't attend.³ Her at a banquet, while the others were still in prison? On January 20, however, she did speak at an anarchist meeting. Pardon, she said, was not justice. One submitted to it without approving of it. "Only amnesty can redress our social grievances." Nevertheless, she had a word of thanks for those who had allowed her "to close my mother's eyes. Men are not bad in themselves, it is power which ruins them and turns them

into bandits.”⁴ The Revolution was now more necessary than ever. Her audience acclaimed her. “No more personalities,” she cried. “Those who fight and die for the Revolution do not need homage. They do what they do because of their own passion, their own desire for the welfare of their fellows and themselves. Long live the Revolution!”⁵

Prison hadn’t changed Louise. Her conviction and her vigour were the same, even if her heart was empty.

She had received a letter in Saint-Lazare from Julie Longchamp, her old friend from Millières days, the other “Vollier girl” with daisies in her hats. Julie invited Louise to come and live with her in Gonesse: “Dear lord, where will you stay, my poor friend?” And she added, “I thought you had grown quite hard, immune to the scandal-mongering... But if our poor silly humanity is making such a fuss about you, you must have some importance...”⁶ (Truly, a prophet is not without honour save in his own country and with his childhood friends.) Julie talked about their vacations of long ago.⁷ Louise, in one of her letters a few months later, urged her friend to see a doctor⁸ but Julie died of cancer soon after. Once again, Louise wrote a funereal tribute:

*Nous allions, rêvant sous les chênes,
Ensemble dans les bois touffus...
La voilà froide sous la terre
Où tout tombe éternellement.
Ce coeur charmant est en poussière.
Esprit, bonté, sont au néant...*⁹

On January 23, Marianne’s remains were transferred to the vault which Louise’s friends had purchased for her. Some forty people attended the ceremony, including Ferré’s brother, Hippolyte, and Vaughan. *L’Intransigeant*, *La Bataille* and the Free Thought Group of the eighteenth arrondissement all sent wreaths. No detail of Louise Michel’s life, not even floral tributes, was too minute for the attentions of the police files!¹⁰

Now she was free — free to join the Russian nihilists, if she wished. She pursued her Russian lessons with Gregorieff more earnestly than ever, even though Hippolyte Ferré and Rochefort both tried to dissuade her from what seemed to them sheer madness.¹¹

She’d get to Russia someday, but meanwhile, she plunged again into the round of anarchist meetings: January 24, Salle Favié, January 25, Salle Molière; January 26, Salle Rivoli.

Italians and Russians came to these meetings; the young and the bourgeois as well, from curiosity. Louise: "Either there will be an international Revolution, or there will be no Revolution at all... Man, the individual, is good; society corrupts him... By eliminating hierarchies, destroying capital, establishing the liberty of all, we'll arrive at a situation where each person works according to his abilities and takes what he needs. When shall we achieve our dream? I don't know. I'm doing my part, though; you do yours." Applause. Ovations. "No speaker in the Chamber of Deputies ever knew such success," remarked *Le Français*.¹² Faithful as ever to her personal vow of poverty, Louise insisted that the proceeds from these meetings be divided equally between the sponsoring organization and the families of political prisoners.¹³

The collectivists weren't going to stand by and allow Louise's charisma to work solely for the anarchist cause. *Le Socialiste* therefore organized a round of meetings starring Jules Guesde, Paul Lafargue and Louise.¹⁴ Even as the collectivists reached that decision, January 31, Louise was addressing an audience of Blanquists and anarchists at the Elysée-Charonne. Her topic was the headline story of the day: some Decazeville miners had thrown the assistant manager of the mine out a window, a man whom they particularly despised, named Watrin. He died of his injuries in hospital.¹⁵ Louise pleaded their cause, described the appalling conditions in which they lived: "Unlike Parisian workers, these men receive no education, either in school or out. Few of them can even read. Their children, at the earliest age possible, are sent down the mines as well. Don't call these men revolutionaries. They don't know what a revolution is. But could you give a better example of revolution than what they have just done?" They taught a valuable lesson: having so often demanded justice without receiving it, they finally seized the man who tyrannized them and threw him out a window. "The government released from prison only those of us who could not be cowed, those of us who knew the Revolution was at hand and therefore were ready to defy their prisons." But the government didn't release the men from Montceau-les-Mines, workers with women and children to support, because it knew that those men were vulnerable to the pressures of prison life and that their sufferings would make others think twice. Such a government deserves no respect. They must prepare for the supreme struggle. "But you are the

people of a revolutionary arrondissement, you understand that." Louise reminded them of the great lesson of the Commune: this time, they wouldn't delay the march on Versailles; this time, they wouldn't leave millions of francs in the Banque de France. True, the people had no weapons. "But we shall use the means which science puts at our disposal to help you defeat your adversaries and bring about the reign of justice." Tumultuous applause.¹⁶

Meeting after meeting, daily, sometimes twice daily. On February 2, Louise, Guesde and Lafargue attended a benefit for the Decazeville miners: "In 1871, the government's abattoirs were in Paris, now they're in Madagascar and Tonkin."¹⁷ February 4, Salle Graffard; 5, Salle Baudin; 6, Salle de l'Ermitage; 8, Salle du Concert.¹⁸ People said she was deranged; she didn't care. What more had she to lose? Her mother was dead; now nothing mattered but the Revolution. "I criss-cross Paris, meeting to meeting, trying to shake the people and show them the road to freedom."¹⁹ At each and every one of those meetings, she gloried in Watrin's murder: "That's how to deal with the exploiters."²⁰

The meetings were always rowdy affairs. Anarchists, collectivists, Blanquists, Possibilists, bourgeois of every shade and grade (including that category known as "stoolpigeon," of course) — all wrangling with each other and trading blows. Then Louise would appear and calm would descend once more.²¹ "There's nothing more amazing than the sight and sound of this old woman in her widow's weeds," wrote *Le Figaro*, a paper which apparently couldn't get enough of the Louise Michel phenomenon. "With her rosy cheeks and her gentle voice, she looks the perfect chaperon for aristocratic young ladies. Then she opens her mouth and spits out a stream of gory nonsense."²² Nobody drew an audience like Louise Michel. "You'd think she was Sarah Bernhardt playing Dôna Sol,* surrounded by a troupe of unemployed wandering players," said Albert Wolff, in that same *Figaro*. "Take away Louise Michel...her party would collapse. She is far and away the most interesting figure of the Third Republic. She doesn't use her obsession with the poor and the downtrodden as a

* the heroine of Victor Hugo's play, *Hernani*; the play was first presented in 1830 and revived in 1877 at the Comédie Française, with *la divine Sarah* as star — *transl. note*

springboard to personal gain. If that Social Revolution ever comes to pass (and we'd bear the brunt of it), Louise Michel still won't be one centime the richer."²³

Her appearances in the Paris suburbs drew storms of protest: "Go tend to your knitting!" "Mend your skirts!" "Send her to Charenton! To Bicêtre!" Louise shrugged it off, and kept talking.²⁴ One night, an anonymous "moderate" slashed the tires of the carriage waiting to take her back from Vincennes to Levallois-Perret, with the result that it tipped over on Boulevard des Batignolles. "Such behaviour is a sad commentary on our Republican civilization," scolded *Le Succès*.²⁵ She went to Ivry and Gentilly on March 5, and to Saint-Denis the next day, where she was so jostled and abused that she had to call for help.²⁶ In Versailles, they pelted her with rocks, sand and snowballs. She took refuge in the park, but the crowd mistook another woman (who had accompanied her) for Louise herself, and bloodied her face.²⁷ March 13, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, where she was pursued and insulted all the way to the train station. Perhaps she *was* a "Don Quixote in skirts," as *Le Pays* called her. She had about her that air of ecstasy, a sort of absurd heroism...but she had also the qualities of devotion, sacrifice and self-denial, which she never betrayed or abandoned. "Her grotesque mission to the suburbs of Paris met with nothing but jeers, laughter, rotten vegetables and (we are told) an attempted ambush. All in all, it bears a striking resemblance to the odyssey of the Knight of La Mancha." If she was Don Quixote, however, her public was Sancho Panza.²⁸

Her name was freely used to provoke incidents for which she denied all responsibility. On March 18, for example, it was announced that Louise Michel was organizing a meeting at Place de la Nation. She counter-attacked: "This hoax" was part of a plot to draw large numbers of people to the public squares of Paris, all in the name of a totally non-existent revolutionary party. "At worst it's a trap, at best, a practical joke. I hope it fools no-one," she announced, via *L'Intransigeant*.²⁹

Louise could now resume the tradition that prison had necessarily interrupted: she spent March 18 celebrating the cult of the Commune in as many different places as she could squeeze in. Salle des Mille Colonnes, for the workers' party; Salle de l'Alcaza, for the socialist workers; somewhere else for the Revolutionary Circle of Equals; yet elsewhere for the

Belleville anarchists; Salle du Siècle, for a peasant group, where she announced that she hoped "the peasants [would] soon light their torches from the flame of the miners' lamps." March 18, 1871 had been the precursor of that great day when the people would finally claim their rights. "Don't worry about what will replace the present order... First, we must topple the government, wipe the slate clean."³⁰

She was quite aware that many people came to her meetings out of curiosity, not conviction. She didn't mind being the reactionaries' pet "exotic beast" of the moment, "as long as it puts money in the miners' fund."³¹ The police, at the government's orders, kept informers constantly on her tail. April 11, she declared that she wanted the Revolution to come about through peaceful means, and she preached the cause of working-class unity.³² She seemed therefore to be moving closer to the socialists and farther from the anarchists but even so, "she keeps on cajoling them, trying to win them over to this chimera of Unity," wrote Agent 30, whose reports are stamped with an unmistakable sympathy for Louise. He must have been one of her true friends.³³

A distraught Louise stood before the Wall of the Federals on May 23 and honoured the Communards who had been gunned down on that spot.³⁴

She used *L'Intransigeant* to air her annoyance about the persecutions that were her daily lot. Yes or no, was Louise Michel going to be allowed freely to walk the streets of Paris? "If I inconvenience the government, let it use one of the many means which it has at its disposal to suppress people... Having hundreds of street-arabs pursue us right into the cemeteries where we lay our friends to rest may be an easy way for the government to hound me, but it is also cowardly." *L'Intransigeant* added, "Was our friend Louise Michel released from prison only to become the object of such stupid, cowardly and constant harrassment?"³⁵

On June 3, Louise and the collectivists Guesde, Lafargue and Susini appeared together at a huge benefit meeting in Théâtre du Château d'Eau for the Decazeville miners, a meeting that was to land her before the Assizes Court once again. It was chaired by Albert Goullé, who was at the time under a court order to appear for questioning.*

* cf. *mandat d'amener*, see transl. note p. 206

Louise: "We look about this Republic to which we are being subjected and we see nothing but infamy. We didn't want troops sent to Tonkin and Tunisia. High finance becomes high crime. We're caught in a death-trap. We have to rid ourselves of these assassins. When the time finally comes to act, my life is all that's left to me so I'll be there. They goad the strikers beyond all limits? So much the better. We are surrounded, governed by gnawing worms [her bestiary, again] who strip this Republic to her bones. They have made her a prostitute who, having come from the people, now devours them."

She was reported to have added: "Those people are thieves and murderers. Thieves are arrested, murderers killed... Throw them out, every last one of them..."

Jules Guesde was much less violent as he assailed the company in Decazeville, which made every decision according to the interests of its sovereign lord, Finance. The company in fact *supported* the strike, because the strike lowered the value of its shares, which then became more attractive to the financiers: "Rothschild reigns. The day he lands in Mazas prison, the true Republic will finally exist." Susini: "The Republic is being run by a gang of thieves and murderers..." Lafargue: "We shall never have our Republic until property belongs to the nation as a whole... Our course is to expropriate the capitalists." A voice vote carried the motion: "Considering that the government of the bourgeois Republic, in order to safeguard its scandalous protection of financiers and exploiters from the people whom they exploit, seeks to arrest* Goullé... [this meeting] therefore sends its congratulations and its support to the heroic miners of Decazeville who, by defending their bread and that of all exploited workers, also defend the cause of the universal Social Revolution..."

Eudes, the Blanquist: "I place Goullé under your protection." Cries of: "Let them come! Long live the Commune!"³⁶

The superintendent of police for the district of Saint-Merri submitted his report, and in due course Louise Michel, Jules Guesde, Lafargue and Susini appeared before the examining magistrate. As usual, Louise took the lead. She acknowledged the general drift of the words being imputed to her but the

* the *mandat d'amener*, in event of non-compliance, was enforceable by arrest
— transl. note

other three, as militant and disciplined revolutionaries, refused either to reply to the magistrate's questions or to sign the interrogation sheet.³⁷

The four accused were allowed to remain at liberty. Louise's mere presence attracted a crowd of some fifty people in the Val-de-Grâce district. Police followed her every step: she spent 20 minutes on Rue Pascal, then went to 29 Rue de Lourcine, then headed for Boulevard Port-Royal and finally back to her starting-point, 283 Rue Saint-Jacques.³⁸

She seemed tired, out of temper. She tried to found an intellectual study group, "The Seekers," which would ignore politics and concentrate on literature and science.³⁹ She asked a few weeks' leave of absence from her normal activities, even had a notice published in *L'Intransigeant*: "Would our friends of the various groups kindly not include my name in any meeting for the next three weeks."⁴⁰

In early August, the "Chateau-d'Eau Affair" (i.e. the case arising from the speeches at the Decazeville benefit) came before the Assizes Court of the Seine. On August 12, the jury was called upon to consider not only this case, but the Mariotte case as well. These were two entirely separate affairs, though the charges were identical: incitement to murder and incitement to pillage.

Mariotte was the editor-in-chief and director of *Le Pilon*, where he published the virulent articles that finally brought him before the courts. "Death to the Slut"* was one headline; another article, in which he referred admiringly to Drumont,** began, "Skin the Jew," and continued with exhortations along the lines of, "unzip the Jew...slash open his flanks, see the lizards come tumbling out..." These anti-Semitic pleasantries won Mariotte an acquittal.

Then came the Chateau-d'Eau affair. Lafargue, Guesde and Susini had all decided not to attend but Louise, as usual, was going to meet her accusers head-on. The prosecution was particularly insistent about the part of her speech that went, "Those men, the men who govern us, are thieves and murderers..."

* meaning, "the Republic" (French, "la gueuse")

** Edouard Drumont (1844 - 1917), Parisian journalist, violently nationalist, anti-semitic and (later) anti-Dreyfus; founder of *La Libre Parole* — transl. notes

Louise: "I don't deny that my speech was violent, but I do deny the form in which you make me appear to have spoken. I am an anarchist. You may convict me for the misdemeanours of thought and action that are truly mine, but not for inanities like these. They don't even make sense."

The judge: "But you do acknowledge that they give the general sense of the words you did use?" And she answered, "Yes."

Véron, police superintendent, made his report. "Mlle Louise Michel said that Finance caused blood to be spilled in Tonkin and Tunisia. She said, 'We are...' " He stumbled, searched his memory, and fell silent. Louise very pleasantly came to his rescue: "We're in a death-trap..." The superintendent recognized the phrase: "Yes, that's it. She also said that they'd made the Republic a prostitute... And she said, while speaking of government ministers, 'those men are thieves and murderers. Thieves are arrested, murderers killed. Throw them out!' " "Were those her exact words?" asked the judge and the superintendent replied, "Absolutely. I wrote them down as she spoke them."

The judge: "What have you to say to that?" "I repeat, while that is the general meaning of what I said, I didn't use those words."

Once the prosecutor had presented his indictment, Louise, as usual, defended anarchism rather than herself: "We must get rid of the caste system that divides us into proletariat and bourgeoisie. We must have a single people, the workers, until they in turn are succeeded by humanity as a whole. This is the goal to which I have dedicated my life. Why bring me to trial? Do you think convicting me will change my beliefs?"

The jury deliberated for twenty minutes, and convicted her. Clearly, this was no simple matter of "dirty Jews." Yes, said the jury, Mlle Louise Michel had indeed incited people to murder and to pillage, though with "extenuating circumstances." She was sentenced to four months in prison and a fine of 100 francs. Her co-defendants were necessarily sentenced in absentia: Lafargue and Guesde to six months in prison, Susini to four months, and each fined 100 francs as well.⁴¹

Le Cri du Peuple commented acidly on these contrasting verdicts. "But of course: Mariotte, the Bonapartist, is acquitted and socialism is condemned." The paper then spelled out the socialist position: "The only provocation of which

socialists can rightly be accused is their wish to take power and change the legal structures so that the question of property is finally settled.”⁴² Albert Goullé, who had chaired that Château-d’Eau meeting, praised Louise’s character: “She continues her mission... Praise does not make her arrogant, insults do not affect her, mockery never disturbs the serenity of her spirit...” But he did express some reservations about her actions, which sometimes could be “ill-considered” and “embarrassing.” Nonetheless, her drawing power was incontestable: “Whatever history may do to her pedestal, she will not be overturned.”⁴³ “A dirty piece of work,” was *La Lanterne*’s judgment, “poor justice and bad politics.”⁴⁴

Though now convicted, Louise was not immediately imprisoned. She quite enjoyed her stays in Saint-Lazare, but this time she didn’t hurry the process. She had some business matters to settle, including the rights to the second part of her *Mémoires*, which she was then writing. She did want to enter Saint-Lazare before September 1, however, so as to be able to complete her sentence before January 1 and thus give the government no chance to pardon her a second time.⁴⁵

People continued to use her name to promote anything and everything. Her specific complaint this time was against her name being linked, under the arcades of the Louvre, “with a rag-tag package of ineptitudes called ‘Boulangism.’” Just another hoax, she protested in the pages of *L’Intransigeant*, by people who apparently could get away with anything.⁴⁶

Louise, perhaps after some reflection on the subject, now began to act as if her conviction had never taken place. And nobody, neither magistrates nor police (who nonetheless scrupulously continued to report her every move), seemed inclined to remind her. On September 2 she was in Salle Lévis, talking about the need for a girls’ school in Montmartre, where education would be free of the old prejudices. Montmartre clearly needed such a school, dominated as it was by that “hideous” monument known as the Sacré-Coeur. One member of her audience, an American, rose to congratulate her on not being the bloodthirsty harpy her notoriety had led him to expect. “Don’t bring up personalities,” she told him.⁴⁷ She attacked capitalism at a meeting in Petit-Ivry on September 19. She went to the Temple beer-hall on September 21 to discuss education, the role of women and free associations of workers. The police spies busily wrote and filed their reports on this

woman who was — given their constant presence — to all intents and purposes in prison, even if technically free to move about.⁴⁸

The reason the authorities hadn't moved to put Louise behind bars was that her co-defendants had challenged their August 13 convictions in absentia. On September 24, therefore, the case came once more before the Assizes Court of the Seine. This time, the three accused attended the proceedings; this time, they were acquitted.⁴⁹ Newspapers of every political stripe joined the laughter at the judicial about-face. Under the circumstances, said the papers, the government really had no choice but to quash Louise Michel's conviction.⁵⁰ As *Le Radical* put it: "You can hardly send Louise Michel to Saint-Lazare while the others go free."⁵¹

And what, wondered the papers, was Louise Michel's reaction to this latest twist? She wasn't even slightly interested: "What's one conviction more or one conviction less to me?" But, at another level, she was delighted: "Financial *shylocking** will soon disappear... The endless plundering will soon end." She looked to the future: "Those who produce the wealth are tired of seeing their children raised just to feed the ravens and their old people left to die like dogs. [the usual bestiary.] Since love of justice is not strong enough for the task, let hatred put its sickle to the field where only poisoned grasses grow, let the plough rip them out by the roots and prepare the land for a new seed..."⁵²

She continued her mission, with speeches for the anarchist group "Land and Liberty,"⁵³ for the Montmartre girls' school that would teach girls the skills they needed to earn a living. "They may someday become *pétroleuses*, but they'll also be women who defend their honour."⁵⁴ The government was increasingly embarrassed about this prisoner who continued to range the city and speak her mind. What to do? The Council of Ministers agreed with the Keeper of the Seals** that she should be pardoned.⁵⁵ "The government backed itself into this corner, and now it has no other way out," commented *L'Intransigeant*, with glee.⁵⁶ Louise, however, wanted amnesty: "The government would be well-advised not to insult me with any more

* her choice of word

** a title left over from the *ancien régime* and synonymous with minister of Justice and Cults — *transl. notes*

pardons... As far as I'm concerned, they can judge me, unjudge me, rejudge me to their heart's content; these schoolyard games really don't interest me."⁵⁷ Louise was right, said *L'Autorité*, because a pardon wouldn't put her on an equal footing with Lafargue, Guesde and Susini, who had all been acquitted: "The Cabinet offers hypocritical, cowardly half-measures; Louise counters with contemptuous refusal."⁵⁸ In November, the government decided to withdraw both the jail term and the fine to which Louise had been sentenced.⁵⁹ End of the whole absurd affair.

This merely allowed Louise to devote herself to another problem, her constant problem — money. For lack of fifty francs, she was about to be evicted from her lodgings at 95 Rue Victor-Hugo. A comrade, Dangers, lent her the money. He also tried to find a dozen or so people who would each pay 50 centimes a week so that, occasionally, he could offer Louise some sugar, coffee and wine — with all due precautions, of course, so that she wouldn't be offended.⁶⁰

She was still deeply involved in political issues — she opposed the Tonkin war, favoured an entente with the German people (the people, mark you, not the Williams and the Bismarcks) and opposed the growing cry for French revenge⁶¹ — but she was becoming involved in literary groups as well.

Louise Michel was unalterably convinced that she had a vocation as a writer. If the sole criterion for that vocation is to feel the need to write, well, yes, Louise constantly expressed her emotions in verse, and she scribbled masses and masses of prose, leaving most of it in a stage of decidedly rough draft. But it wasn't her writing that made her a public figure, it was her command of the spoken word and her performances before the courts. She knew this, and was somewhat bitter about it. "My friends look on me as a Lady Bountiful,* rather than as a writer. They are mistaken, entirely mistaken," she confided to a *Figaro* reporter shortly after completing her *Mémoires* and three novels besides, while in prison.⁶²

Louise had been publishing novels, either alone or in collaboration, ever since her return from New Caledonia. She'd begun in 1881, with *La Misère* and *Les Méprisés*, co-authored by "Jean Guétre," a pen-name for Marguerite Tinayre (who,

* literally, "little blue coat," since a celebrated philanthropist of the 1830s wore such an outfit — *transl. note*

under the Empire, had published *La Marguerite* and *Un Rêve de femme*).⁶³ Fayard published the books in installments, under Louise's name. "The huge success of *La Misère* (almost 40,000 subscribers) has led us to publish *Les Méprisés*. This throbbing history of a fallen girl was torn from the living flesh of the people." The twenty installments sold for 50 centimes each, or the whole series for 10 francs. The novels swarmed with crime, attempted crime, charitable ladies who turn out to be nothing but vampires, poor young girls who become "the game in the hunt for pleasure," fops and dandies... They're enormous novels, as impossible to summarize as they are to read (and I tried). The partnership did not last long: when Louise, from Saint-Lazare, sold *La Bataille* the rights to *La Misère*, she took care to insist that the second part was to be hers alone. She and Mme Tinayre simply didn't agree politically; one still hoped for "improvements in the existing social edifice" while the other was convinced it had to be destroyed: "She wanted changes in government, I wanted the abolition of government."⁶⁴ Her next collaboration was with Jean Winter (who had worked on her play, *Nadine*). Together they turned out the novels *La Fille du Peuple* and *Le Bâtard impérial* (on very much the same subject as *Nadine*).

Le Bâtard impérial: "A red spot like a vampire's wound appeared on the waxen neck of the child." *La Fille du Peuple*: " 'Thank you,' said a voice that might have issued from the tomb. Suddenly, a body fell motionless at the monk's feet..." You see the style.

Les Paysans, a co-operative effort with Emile Gautier, set in the days of Vercingetorix, was no better. ("United, the entire world cannot resist us," said Vercingetorix.") Louise managed to work in the entire mythology of her beloved Gauls: virgins on the Ile de Sein; human sacrifice on the dolmens, cromlechs and menhirs*; blood, flames, martyrs; the bards chanting their tales in the depths of the forests (oak trees covered with mistletoe, naturally); the perpetual revolt of the poor against the rich, the occupied against the occupier, the weak against the powerful. "Let the flame of justice flare, let it sweep the fields, the forests, the houses, the sheds, with incandescent brilliance... Let all be reduced to ashes... Liberty cannot arrive but on a sea of blood, a sea of flames..." Pog'ham arrives just in

* stone circles of prehistoric monoliths — *transl. note*

time to save two sacrificial victims, who (of course) are Gauls. But no! he's too late after all. A druid (read, "obscurantist priest") had thrown them into the fire at precisely the same moment that, in Rome, a patrician sold into bondage some freemen who had failed to pay their debts.

The copy of this manuscript deposited in the National Library unfortunately ends at page 112, leading the reader directly on to something called *Le Roi du crime*, by a certain Camille Bonheur. (It's a huge novel, complete with lithograph of a lily-white maiden swooning in the arms of a black man, with a top-hatted gentleman looking on from a canoe... But our subject is not Camille Bonheur.)

Louise wrote *Le Gars Yvon* on her own. It was the history of Brittany in the days of the French Revolution, as secular and republican in tone as some other histories are pious and monarchical. Opposite values, but equally determined to be edifying. The book argues that "the old Gaullish blood is stirring in Brittany once again..." Enough of that.

The preface to *Le Claque-Dent*, published by Dentu, made it's author's intentions clear: she was writing "committed" literature, which she believed presented a "realistic" vision of society. "*Le Claque-Dent* is the agony of the old world... A combination of Shylock and Satyr, his fangs seek living flesh, his claws rake the hideous misery of the world. It is the final delirium...the death-knell of tyranny." The pages teem with spies, Bretons (of course), capitalists and murderers (one and the same), "tainted" (i.e. syphilitic) financiers, imprisonments, poisonings, assassinations and the like. But then there arises, in the midst of a wild tribe in the heart of Africa, a truly free colony...

Same sort of theme for *Les Microbes humains*. Vipers writhe, wolves prowl, but harmony reigns. Wagner had foreshadowed it all, with his "gigantic chords." Finally, after unspeakable tribulations, men — "wearied of the evils done them, or sickened by the evils they did to others" — fled to the far-flung points of the globe (the glacial solitudes of the Poles or steaming African forests) where they turned their aggressive instincts to the conquest of nature instead of each other, and founded a new race. This new race, thanks to justice, liberty and science, would inspire tomorrow's humanity: "And who can say? their tale may be one of the epic songs of new-born legend."

Les Crimes de l'Epoque was an unpublished collection of stories which opened with three corpses in the morgue: a woman whose throat had been slit, an old worker who had committed suicide and a little girl who had been battered to death. Eugène Sue* is pale stuff compared to Louise's tour of the lower depths. In her world, financiers steal off to Père-Lachaise where — revealed for the vampires they truly are — they dig up a young man who isn't really dead at all, but merely in a trance...

In *Le Monde nouveau*, we find that all the characters whom we thought dead at the end of *Les Microbes humains* weren't dead after all, for here they are again. And here too, more human sacrifice, except it has been transferred from Vercingetorix's day to contemporary Paris. One group of old madwomen burns another group of old madwomen, singing:

O feu né du soleil,
O Feu qui purifie,
Dévore un sang vermeil
O Feu, prends cette vie.

The fire theme. The blood theme. Once again, men sickened by this disgusting life (one can sympathize) set off to create a new world in the wilds. But a gigantic explosion pulverizes it in the end. "And thus millions of men were destroyed, along with their marvels of art and new inventions." Louise didn't lose hope, however. She mentions that the next volume (which never did appear) will chronicle the birth of "the dream of the new legend," after wading through appropriate quantities of hurricane, warfare and general death and devastation.

L'Ere nouvelle was yet another statement of Louise's personal beliefs. Society — "that old ogress who has fed her damnable life with human blood from the beginning of time" — is finally dying. Revolt shakes the earth; the revolution approaches; the capitalist Bastille will fall. "The religious hells and the earthly ones will all collapse together." She predicted: "This, at least, is certain: the star of Revolution will rise before this century has ended." And then machines, having become the worker's slave, will produce for the benefit of all rather than the few. The accustomed bestiary troops by once more: human ants, the lion that devours his trainer, the

* melodramatic French novelist, 1804 - 57; author of *Les Mystères de Paris*, *Le Juif Errant* — transl. note

bull that breaks his chains. The last great bard, Victor Hugo, has died, but his new counterpart is the people themselves.

Ah, how lovely life will be for those who come after us! All will have the right to live, even the lazy, for they are merely sick, just as the deaf and the blind are sick. Away with the debating societies, of any stripe! The cause of the desperate will rise to engulf us all. The Red Easter has come! Prometheus announces the new age! Those who dared attack the gods and kings have always fallen; now the kings themselves are falling. Soon we shall live the words spoken by the Old Man from the Mountain, Blanqui the Captive: "No god nor master." Science will bring forth harvests in the desert; the energy of the tempests and whirlpools will carve paths through the mountains. Undersea boats will discover lost continents. Electricity will carry ships of the air above the icy poles. The ideas of Liberty, Equality and Justice will finally burst into flame. Each individual will live his integral part within humankind as a whole. Progress being infinite, transformations will be perpetual. Before returning to the crucible, each man will know his share of eternity, whether in a few years or a few days. And if love hasn't the force to bring about the liberating hour, then hatred will do its work: "Hatred, pure as steel, strong as the axe. Long live hatred!"

Louise's novels were jumbled, preposterous and apocalyptic — hardly the images of "realism" that she claimed them to be. Perhaps it's fair to say they were the images of a detestable world, as filtered through a mad imagination. Somehow, in the end, their very madness and exaggeration manage to touch the reader.

Furthermore, Louise stands up very well to a comparison with Eugène Sue, Edgar Allan Poe and the writers of science fiction. She foretold radio ("soon there will be long-distance waves"), organ transplants ("The ship's doctor claimed that human life, with preservatives and repairs, could survive much longer than the normal span"), submarines, airplanes and even the atomic bomb and space travel ("the planets are already sending us signals").

The prodigious style and length of her novels, the sheer disorder, makes them completely unreadable, but they do provide rich material for anyone tempted to try a little psychoanalysis. Gaston Bachelard offers us some guidelines.

Blood and fire are two of Louise Michel's most important

themes. Bachelard's analysis of the significance of fire seems to correspond to what we know of Louise. Fire, he says, is disobedience, the desire for change, the desire "to push the times on their way." It is both the instinct to live and the instinct to die. "When one wants total change, one calls on fire." In the most ancient mythologies, sacrifices that were intended to bring about the rebirth of the world always included the two elements of fire and blood. "To seize fire or hurl oneself into it, to conquer others or destroy oneself, to be Prometheus or Empedocles: this is the basic, transforming psychological oscillation."⁶⁵ Louise was a fierce prophet of the future, but she had also a primitive continuity with the ancient myths of humanity.

Her books never sold very well. And yet, she'd complain that people stole her manuscripts, that they mysteriously disappeared, that they'd reappear in pirate versions.⁶⁶ She complained about her collaborators. Mme Tinayre, she said, continued to have *Les Méprisés* published under her own name and pocketed every centime it brought in.⁶⁷ Grippa (or Winter) brought charges against a Mme Bertre (pen-name Marie de Besneray) for stealing the name "Nadine" for her own book, which Plon then published. The judge found against Grippa, on the grounds that the play *Nadine* had been advertised and published with Louise Michel's name as sole author and that consequently, Grippa had not established his collaboration and had no cause to bring court action. Louise refused to turn to bourgeois litigation to settle this dispute.⁶⁸ She complained that some people suggested "that I publish my ideas without signing my name to them, while others publish their ideas freely under my name. I want no part of it."⁶⁹ Excoffon, the printer (and husband of Louise's old friend Béatrix), threatened to sue her for her share of the publication costs of one of her novels. An employee in the bailiff's office, however, warned her what was afoot and then tried to arrange an out-of-court settlement.⁷⁰ And the publishing house, Fayard, was doing its best to keep Louise from taking her *Mémoires* to the rival house, Roy.⁷¹

Not that things were going that smoothly with Roy. Louise wanted to preface her *Mémoires* with the texts of her various court convictions. Roy, instead, wanted to print them as appendices at the end of the book. She accused him of "distorting" them.⁷² When she received the page proofs (which

she corrected very sloppily), she complained that he hadn't included the extra material she had supplied, even though she thought it better than the rest of the book. Or did he not like it? "But it doesn't matter," she wrote him, "since I told you to throw out whatever you didn't like. I have no choice but to keep silent, since we never meet and you have endless opportunity to hear all the gossip and slander about me and my family. Why should its venom not work on you? It does on everyone else. But I shall say no more. I embrace you despite everything."⁷³

Finally, in February 1886, the *Mémoires* appeared. Roy had decided to write a preface since, though everyone thought they knew Louise Michel, a distinction had to be made between the legend and the reality. For most members of the reading public, he said, especially in the provinces, Louise was the spectre, "a pitiless Fury," an ogre, a monster in human form, ready to envelop the world in steel, fire, petrol bombs and dynamite. And yet, in fact, she was a pleasant woman "with a soft voice, and eyes that sparkle with intelligence and goodness." Roy admitted that he himself had been "subjugated, charmed, fascinated, conquered..." This woman of violence turned out to be absolutely charming, the close friend of prison directors and nuns. He talked about her generosity, told the story of the time she went to Lyon for a lecture and came home again in her petticoats, having given her dress to a poor woman along the way. And her love for her mother...when you heard her pronounce the word, *maman*, you'd think she was a child again. Then there were her political opinions. Well, personally he neither approved nor disapproved. Still, friend and foe alike had to recognize "her courage and gallantry." She had endured deportation and prison in a manner worthy of the martyrs of the first centuries: "Born nineteen hundred years earlier, she would have faced the wild animals of the Amphitheatre; born during the Inquisition, she would have died in the flames; born during the Reformation, she would have faced the Catholic hangmen with dignity. She seems to have been made for suffering and martyrdom." Her gifts were intellectual as well as moral: she was a good musician, drew well, and had great talent for foreign languages. Everything interested her, including botanical and natural-historical research. Finally, she was a poet.

Such an extravagant outpouring of praise would swell the

head of any author. And Louise was not modest to begin with.

The *Mémoires* were dedicated to "Myriam," in honour both of her mother and of Marie Ferré. "Speed your way, O my book, to the tombs where they sleep! May my life soon run its course, and bring me to sleep beside them. Should this book somehow produce some good effect, those of you who judge all things by their results should not impute that motive to me; I would be surprised by such a development, that's all." And then, touching and revealing words: "With nothing to hope for and nothing to fear, I hurry toward my goal, like those who throw the cup away along with the dregs."⁷⁴

Her *Mémoires* have already been cited in this book, for I have used them as source material (with all due reservations) when no other exists. They're quite modern in their incoherence, rambling, proceeding by association of memories rather than by chronology (the clump of students' *sabots* in Audeloncourt brings to mind the Auberive prisoners), too long in some places and too short in others (her first meeting with Victor Hugo), and completely silent on some parts of her life (out of prudence, she said, and to protect people who might otherwise be accused of complicity with revolutionaries). This "prudent" silence blankets her religious and royalist youth, for Louise instead presents us with the image of what she was later to become. In short, her memoirs, like most people's memoirs, are far from the whole and perfect truth. And yet, cheek-by-jowl with the politico-mystical prophecies lie some delightful passages, such as her descriptions of her Vroncourt childhood, or her account of the New Caledonian countryside. For Louise did have a poet's sensitivity, and sometimes it glimmers through. Ruthless editing could probably result in quite a respectable anthology of her works, but it would have to be ruthless: her gifts were seriously marred by her total lack of critical judgment and, truth be told, her unshakable self-confidence.

One is forced to conclude that it was the strength of Louise's personality rather than her talents as a writer that inspired M. Anatole Baju, founder of the Decadents, to invite her to be a guest lecturer. Even though her

Des roses de Provins aux pétales vermeils

*Etendaient leurs rameaux sur les résédas blonds...*⁷⁵

was worth any quantity of "decadent" or symbolist verse.

Verlaine, who was highly enthusiastic about this new

school of poetry, wrote a virtual manifesto for it which he then sent to Anatole Baju: "...Decadence, the Decadents, Decadism. This marvel is your work, my dear fellow; you, the master of words, lead the way... 'Decadism' is a genius of a word, an amusing little invention that will take its place in literary history; this barbarism of yours is a fine standardbearer. It is short, useful, 'ready-to-hand' — *handy** — it neatly dispels the degrading connotation of decadence; it sounds literary, it isn't pedantic; I repeat, it works, it will do the job..." Decadism is, "properly speaking, the literature that burst forth in a time of decadence, not to march to the beat of that time but 'against the grain' [he incorporates Huysmans], in opposition to its time; it uses its own delicacy, cultivation and refinement to react against the literary and other platitudes of the age."⁷⁶

Baju, for his part, announced: "It is the final condemnation of Symbolism, of Instrumentation and other literary heresies, it is the end of a whole era of hesitation and tentative gestures, it is the long-awaited light to beckon young writers and give them their new direction."⁷⁷ (Such modesty...)

Literary circles, in short, were waiting for M. Baju to proclaim the "new world." *Le Décadent*, a literary and artistic review, brought together quite a roster of talented and frequently notorious poets: Verlaine, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Moréas, Stuart Merrill, Laurent Tailhade, René Ghil and even Barbey d'Aurevilly. Verlaine wrote a ballad (which was published in the review) praising "Decadents and Symbolists." This suggested a regrettable confusion on his part, since Baju had condemned the Symbolists. However, the literary world had not at that point reached the heights of anathema and excommunication which were to characterize the Surrealist movement.

*Quelques-un dans tout Paris
Nous vivons d'orgueil et de dèche.
D'alcool encore qu'érpis
Nous buvons surtout de l'eau fraîche.
...Nous sommes les bons écrivains.*⁷⁸

One has to agree: they *were* the "good writers."

It was in *Le Décadent*, once again, that Verlaine published his ballad to Louise Michel (December 4, 1886). And yet, during an 1891 interview on the evolution of literary trends, Verlaine

* English in the original — *transl. note*

said: "People threw that label, 'decadent,' at us like an accusation. So I took it up like a battle-cry. But it didn't mean anything." He was opposed to all literary schools: "'Symbolism'? No idea. Must be a German word, eh? Well, whatever it is, I don't give a damn."⁷⁹

Anarchists were attracted to the Decadents and to anybody else seeking new directions in literature because they, too, rejected the principle of authority, distrusted the bourgeoisie and its literature, and demanded the freedom to study any subject and reach any conclusion.⁸⁰

And so, it was announced that citizen Louise Michel would speak at a literary conference to be held Wednesday, October 20, 1886, in the Salle de l'Ermitage. The meeting was under the patronage of a group of political and literary Decadents, and the topic would be an analysis of the four main literary schools — Romantic, Classical, Naturalist and Decadent. The floor would be open to all, and entry would cost 0 fr. 50. Stéphane Mallarmé, Moréas, René Ghil and the editors of *Le Temps* and *Le Figaro* all received personal invitations to attend, with the comment, "We wish to assure you that you will be completely free to expound your own ideas on the subject."

Mlle Louise Michel and M. Anatole Baju entered the hall arm-in-arm, "under the leaden weight of flattened skies, to the raucous flare of the lamps." The editor of *Le Paris* didn't like decadism, didn't like Louise Michel, didn't like this curious alliance between the two and, as the above sample shows, set about mocking what he thought to be the decadent style: "The orb is hammered from an angelus-bell, in a putrifying flight of spiders..."

As usual, Louise wandered from the topic. "The decadents will be anarchists, or won't be..." Decadents were asked to come and say a few words from the podium. One young man who came up said, "The awkward and disquietening inexpressible..."* People didn't hear him clearly and asked for clarification; he said, "It doesn't matter..." and went on to talk about a sonnet by Mallarmé.

* the young man's words were: "L'inexprimable inquiétant et malitorne..." Some listeners heard "maritorne"; others, "maricorne." "Malitorne" was the name of the ugly sewing-girl in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and came to be used of any ugly woman or, by extension, slut. "Maritorne" is a variation on the same word. "Maricorne" doesn't exist — *transl. note*

Louise took the stage again. "Our senses are still imperfect, but man's thought should be able to express itself through every sound, every harmony, every form... Anarchists, just like decadents, want the end of the old world. Decadents are creating an anarchy of style." The *Le Paris* representative, obviously a Philistine, was still unimpressed and sniffed: "Let us hope that Louise Michel will not adopt the style of her new allies for her own proclamations." But, he concluded (and what reassuring news for the bourgeoisie), these decadents were not dangerous.⁸¹

A few days later, Louise rose to defend decadence in Salle Pétrelle. Instead of laughing at it, she said, people would do better to study its theory. The decadent movement wanted to use symbols to study the profound realities and needs of humanity. This might well be the approach needed to free literature from its old, well-encrusted traditions. One comrade tried to brush aside all this literary nonsense and steer the conversation to the strike in Vierzon. Others shouted that they hadn't paid their money to listen to politics, and called for Bajou. But M. Bajou refused to speak.⁸²

One of the people who was most upset at this attack on traditional literature was Louise Michel's old comrade from New Caledonia days, Henry Bauer. (Mind you, she had scandalized him even then with her interest in the music and legends of the Melanesians.) Since returning to France, he had become a man of many interests, and wrote for *L'Echo de Paris*. "One of the great victims of the anarchist flood may well be the French language itself." And then, in the best tradition of sophistry (for the decadents were, if anything, overly refined), he added: "The holy language of the Republic of the future may well be the patois of the circus clown, the flat accents of Nini the scrubwoman or Phémie the dyer or Victoire my cook." This alliance of decadents ("hollow-bellied pen-pushers") with anarchists amounted to "a war-machine levelled at language and society alike. It took an extraordinary mind to pull together maunderings like that and shape them into a gospel, and that mind belongs to Louise Michel. She is now the apostle of the new dogma; she came down from the heights of Belleville to proclaim the new verb." He took pains to stress that they had been friends in New Caledonia, and that she wasn't the "mad beast of the Apocalypse" that the bourgeoisie imagined: in fact, "this vilified creature is one of the best, the

gentlest, the most charming people it is possible to meet." He spoke, too, of her selflessness, her devotion, her generosity. However, she had now fallen victim to "bad literature" (Mallarmé? Verlaine?) and she was "the last of the great romantics." (True, she had been heavily influenced by Victor Hugo, but "bad" is seldom the word used to describe him.) Louise, he concluded, was "the Dona Quixote of the Barricades," her soul a mixture of "Saint Teresa of Avila and Marie Alacoque."* 83

Louise took time off from defending Decadism to defend Zola, whose book, *Germinal*, had just appeared, and naturalism as well: "Our men of letters are wrong to base their writings on what they learn in the lycée instead of on experience. Only socialist theories can produce good literature." 84 A very early argument for Socialist Realism!

But no matter what she was doing, defending the Decadents or the Decazeville miners, Louise had an unfailing ability to provoke scandal. Even when she was being her grandmotherly best — say, in 1884, when she wrote *Contes et légendes pour les enfants*. She included in this collection of children's stories a few of the texts which she had written in Auberive prison for *Le Livre du Jour de l'an*. Rochefort wrote a preface for her new book, in which he praised her life of "devotion, sacrifice and courage." He nodded approval at the selected stories about Thumbellina and Bluebeard: "Your stories are excellent, my dear Louise; they elevate rather than degrade."

Louise's morality was a stern one, as we know by now, but hardly conventional. It hadn't changed since her days in the schoolroom: "We must inculcate children with a passion to learn, a love of beauty and a horror of becoming either tyrants or slaves even though, in many families, children fall into one category or the other." Children should start learning, at a very early age, "the austere joy of struggling with difficulties, the happiness of overcoming them and then searching out new challenges, the pleasure of making some progress, degree by degree, for all humanity." 85 Given this view of morality, it isn't surprising that she was also working on *Lectures encyclopédiques*, stories intended to explain to children the genesis of humanity, the great epic of man on this minute planet lost in

* since canonized (1920) — *transl. note*

the heart of the cosmos.⁸⁶

The *Contes et légendes* were meant to illustrate "how little glory and supposed 'grandeur' really count." She was, after all, an old woman with a great deal of experience in the world's mockery: "Never laugh at madmen or old people." One must give, hold nothing back, attach no importance "to one's own insignificant self" but instead, be worthy of humanity. The only reward, our good conscience.

The mayor of Saint-Ouen thought he would give some of Louise's books as a school prize. There was an immediate uproar, and the mayor was dismissed.⁸⁷ Louise made matters worse by defending both him and the morality of her books. It's true she didn't mention religion, since God was dead, nor politics, since governments should disappear, leaving humans to govern themselves by attraction, the law of the universe. (She must have been reading Fourier.) But her books, she insisted, were moral ones: didn't her detractors realize she wanted to give children the desire to learn, to become poets, artists and musicians? First, though, they must be told the truth, and this truth was very hard for "right-thinking" people to accept: we are punished for doing good, rewarded for doing evil, and neither of those reactions is of any importance. The only satisfaction one ought to seek is that of a good conscience.⁸⁸ It was an exceedingly high morality but, as the horrified bourgeois rightly discerned, one which pointed its finger at society and rejected society's laws. One sees why *Le Journal des Débats* and *Le Gaulois* infinitely preferred the words of Mme de Ségur.

Mme de Ségur, for example, would never have joined Louise in taking up the cudgels on behalf of Duval. Duval was an anarchist who had been sentenced to death for practising the principle of individual seizure: he burgled the mansion of Madeleine Lemaire, an artist, and then stabbed a policeman. Louise called on anarchists to try and save him: "We must go to Place de la Roquette on the day of Duval's execution, crying 'Long live anarchy!' Even if it leads to bloody battle."⁸⁹ On January 29, 1887, she launched an attack on the authorities who convict "poor lost souls" like Duval on charges of robbery and murder, while they themselves were practising those very same activities, on a much grander scale. What were wars but armed robbery? And what was it but murder "when millions of men slay each other to seize lands and ransom the defeated?"

French and German socialists mustn't fight each other, she continued; they should unite against their bourgeoisies.⁹⁰ Duval's appeal was rejected. Louise apparently kept guard outside the prison for several nights, accompanied by the doomed man's wife.⁹¹ In the end, M. Grévy commuted Duval's sentence to one of forced labour, for life.

Come March, Louise again honoured the Commune and answered some questions addressed to her by the audience. "First, when we glorify that day, we honour not the personalities involved but the Revolution itself, for which so many of our people died. By the law of progress, there has been a growth of magnitude in the sixteen years that separate the Commune from the Revolution which frightened governments now see drawing nigh. Second, when you are in an insurrectional movement, you cannot decide for yourself whether to live or die; death is the most whimsical of all lotteries. It is not our fault that we still live, though so many comrades died. Third, yes, I do believe that power is a treacherous and evil weapon, as ill-suited to our day as a stone-age axe..."⁹²

Ten days later, on March 28, Louise attended a meeting which had been organized by some food workers. She was applauded, but she refused the applause: she told them they should instead cheer all women who wanted to live free and work freely, "women who are not for sale."⁹³ After the meeting, a group of anarchists set off to demonstrate against the employment bureaus — slavery bureaus, they said — and cut through Temple district to reach Les Halles. The traditionally conservative women of that area flew to the attack as soon as they saw Louise. They surrounded her, maligned her, pelted her with vegetables. The police had to intervene for her own protection. The right-wing papers loved it: the police protecting Louise Michel from the people? Wonderful. Perhaps the police had their good points after all? But then they shook their heads: helping "demagoguery" out of a tight corner was "a losing game," because the main tenet of the "demagogue's" faith was ingratitude.⁹⁴ Louise denied the second observation and tried to correct the first: "I wasn't protected yesterday, nor was I abused. All that happened was that I was taken to the police station when a few idlers took it into their heads to jostle me a bit. And then I went home on the Wagram-Bastille omnibus."⁹⁵

Anyway, insults and rotten vegetables would hardly give

her pause. And she didn't pause. She urged students to protest fee increases for their faculties.⁹⁶ On Good Friday, she made speeches about religious prejudice, rents and the high price of bread.⁹⁷ Her usual topics were included as well: education for women, the proletarian struggle and the unity of all revolutionary forces.⁹⁸ But she was beginning to feel that her friends pushed her a bit hard, and asked that, "because of urgent work," they not make engagements in her name without at least clearing it with her first.⁹⁹

The "urgent work" in question was her urgent need to make some money and, as usual, Louise was sure her literary efforts would see her through. Vain hope. The Central Committee of the Union for Revolutionary Action had to give her a pair of boots. Yet at the same time, Louise was begging Dangers to send ten francs to the Drouard ladies, a pair of schoolteachers who couldn't pay their rent.¹⁰⁰ In an age of faith, Louise would surely have been a mendicant monk. The nineteenth century, however, was only an age of faith for her alone.

And on June 1, 1887, Louise was indeed full of faith. She proclaimed that the universal Revolution was about to happen. The proof was the Belgian revolutionary movement and its encouraging successes against the worm-eaten, rotten bourgeoisie. Her new burst of faith led her to refuse to campaign for pension funds for workers who had been injured on the job, since "the coming Revolution will guarantee, if not wealth, at least comfort to all workers in their declining years."¹⁰¹

And indeed, the bourgeois parliamentary Republic was undergoing a severe crisis. General Boulanger had managed to gather quite a range of supporters to his cause and his name: everybody from Rochefort and *L'Intransigeant* to the Bonapartists, the monarchists and the League of Patriots. The presidency was in serious difficulty, for M. Grévy's own son-in-law, Wilson, was deep in financial scandal. Perhaps the time was ripe for anarchists and Blanquists to unite and try to dislodge the dictatorship of the capitalist system. "I had the pleasure of a conversation with Louise Michel," reported one police informer, who used the signature "A.I." "She confirmed that the extreme Left will ally itself with the Right in order to topple the ministry. She believes that the demonstration being organized by Rochefort will be extremely effective, and will help spread anarchist ideas."¹⁰²

On October 16 in Salle Favié, Louise was cheered with cries of "Down with Grévy!" She joined every demonstration held against the president.¹⁰³ Her motivation certainly wasn't any great admiration for the worthy General Boulanger, "the sabre-rattler," who had won his spurs in the repression of the Commune. In fact, she was afraid that a military coup was in preparation and that unseating Grévy's ministry was intended to precipitate that coup.¹⁰⁴ On December 1, she helped lead a demonstration against the Chamber of Deputies. The gates to the Palais-Bourbon had been closed against them, however, and the demonstrators couldn't force their way in.¹⁰⁵

Grévy finally resigned and Sadi-Carnot, by 308 votes, became the new president of the Republic. Louise rejoiced in the departure of Grévy and also in the defeat of "that intriguer" Jules Ferry, "Bismarck's lackey."¹⁰⁶ Not that Sadi-Carnot would be any better: "that stinking mess, the parliamentary system, is still in place" so the people must remain vigilant.¹⁰⁷

Then she fell ill. Since she had virtually no resources of her own, friends had to raise funds on her behalf.¹⁰⁸

XV - THE CHOUAN'S REVENGE

On January 20, 1888, the prefect of Seine-Inférieure warned the minister of the Interior that Louise Michel would be visiting Le Havre for two public meetings. Even though the visit had already been announced and denied on several occasions, the prefect charged the assistant prefect and the mayor of Le Havre with taking "all measures necessary to public order."¹

This time, the story was true. Louise appeared in the Théâtre de la Gaité on January 22, at 2 p.m. The hall was packed. Louise was first speaker on an agenda devoted to the subjects of capital and work, misery and its consequences: the general analysis was that society was crumbling and conditions ripe for the Revolution. A typographical worker spoke next, calling on his audience to refuse to pay either taxes or rent, since the only capital was intelligence and strong arms. Louise took the podium again, and attacked the government: "If one can use the word 'government' of such a motley collection of swindlers, cheats and robbers." This brought protests and furious whistling from the audience.

"Well, then," replied Louise, "what would you call the men who organized the Tonkin expedition and all the shady deals that went with it, what would you call Wilson & Co. who sell anything they can get their hands on, especially that emblem of what the bourgeoisie calls 'honour' [Wilson had been trafficking in medals]? ...Society must be reborn, and we'd like to see that accomplished through peace and hard work, not bloodshed. But if the bourgeoisie doesn't want to make the Revolution with us,

then we'll make it against them. The Revolution is inevitable, and close at hand. We shall make that Revolution, with you or without you. The choice is yours..."²

That meeting ended at 5 p.m. and three hours later, Louise was speaking once again, this time to an audience of 1500 people in Salle de l'Elysée, where her topics were the scandals of the day and the idea of the Revolution. A woman named Belliard took the stage and started to complain about her misfortunes at the hands of the judicial system. People tried to shout her down, but Louise defended her right to speak. Once again, Louise was asked what happened to the proceeds from these lectures, and once again she replied that the money went to the poor and to the anarchist propaganda effort.³

Suddenly, a man rushed to the podium. He was "tall, clothed in black and had a tragic pallor to his features," as the editor of *Le Petit Havre* later reported. "I don't speak a good 'priestly' French," he said. "I'm not a thief and I'm not a murderer. I'm a Breton." The audience murmured a bit at this strange declaration, and Louise picked up the thread of her speech again with an anecdote. Then the man made the sign of the cross behind her back, and fired twice. "Citizen, you're wounded!" cried the journalists, who were seated near the stage. "No, no," she replied, with a smile, "they were blanks."

But she had been shot. There was a bullet lodged in her left temple which first Dr. Malherbe and then Dr. de Lignerolles tried vainly to remove. Louise kept her composure as they probed, "even though you could hear steel scraping against bone."⁴ She wasn't angry at her attacker; the only thing that had raised her temper that evening was the suggestion that she earned herself a tidy living from these meetings. She therefore told the public prosecutor that she had no intention of lodging a complaint against her assailant, since he was obviously a case for the doctors, not the magistrates.⁵

The doctors urged Louise to rest for at least a day; instead, she took the 6 a.m. train to Paris, for she had an important meeting arranged with an editor ("I get the impression he's bungled the whole business, and I need that money very badly"). Anyway, her cousin, Mme Rollet, would be growing anxious, and then there were the cats, who'd been shut up all night.⁶

The police had had a great deal of trouble protecting the young Breton from the angry crowd in Salle de l'Elysée. He

turned out to be one Pierre Lucas, who explained that he had listened to Louise talk that afternoon, was offended by her blasphemy and had taken his revolver along to the evening meeting, determined to assassinate that devil in female skin.⁷

The special superintendent in Le Havre informed the minister of the Interior of Louise's departure from his city, but forgot to inform his counterpart at Saint-Lazare station as well. He received a severe reprimand from the minister: "Your colleague was therefore unable to arrange for special surveillance of that train."⁸ A grave and unpardonable offence. And it gave Louise the rare treat of stepping off a train without immediately having special agents at her heels.

Dr. Demouly examined her in Levallois-Perret and referred her to Dr. Labbé at the Beaujon hospital. "I have the honour to present to you Louise Michel, struck in the left mastoid region by a revolver bullet. I was able to probe clear to the bone itself, which appears to be intact. Am unable to trace the subcutaneous path of the bullet and therefore turn this case over to your investigations. No fever. Temperature 37°. Nervous system slightly excited. A little bromide and some chloral syrup."⁹ Louise reassured Rochefort by letter: "My dear friend, I am very pleased by this demonstration of your friendship. I am well. Tomorrow Dr. Labbé will extract the bullet. I really am well, very well. I embrace you affectionately."¹⁰

Dr. Labbé wrote his colleague, Demouly: "The wound in the mastoid region seems a fairly simple one. However, it is ragged and surrounded by some mortified* tissue. Given these circumstances, we must take care, since the healing process will necessarily be somewhat prolonged. One must watch out for erysipelas.** Wash the wound with 3% carbolic lotion and dress it with gauze soaked in the same solution, cover the gauze with sticking-plaster and wrap the whole in a bandage."¹¹ The doctors forbade Louise to leave her rooms, which she found "incomprehensible," since she felt so well. And she needed to go out, because she had to help Lucas, who was in much worse condition than she: "Poor man, the crowd nearly tore out his eye for that act of folly, while both my eyes are intact."¹²

She wrote Lucas' wife: "Madame, I know your sorrow and

* i.e. gangrenous

** a contagious skin disease — *transl. notes*

I wish to reassure you. It is impossible that your husband was in full command of his wits when he acted, therefore, it is also impossible that he will not be returned to you." She promised to have her friends and the newspapers in both Paris and Le Havre take up his case. "If your husband is not quickly set free, I shall return to Le Havre and this time, my lecture would have as its sole purpose the accomplishment of this measure of justice."¹³ When Rochefort came to visit her, hard on Clemenceau's heels, she received him with a certain note of asperity: "Instead of worrying about me, *L'Intransigeant* should keep all that pity and solicitude for the wife of that poor Lucas, down there in Le Havre without either bread or resources. You must help me free that poor madman from the hands of the judiciary, and make sure that his family doesn't die of hunger in the meantime. That's what the press should be doing."¹⁴

She gave him a copy of her letter to Mme Lucas, for publication in the paper. She also gave him a gift, the second bullet, which had caught harmlessly in the folds of her hat. "A souvenir for Rochefort: the bullet destined for my ear, but found in my hat."¹⁵

A magistrate was sent to Levallois-Perret on a fact-finding mission, and Louise insisted once again that Lucas was not responsible for his acts. "That unfortunate man suffers from an agitation of the spirit. He heard them say I was pocketing the proceeds from the meeting, and his simple honesty rebelled at the thought. Not only will I not bring a complaint against him; I think I may, in all good conscience, ask that he be released."¹⁶

She wrote the well-known lawyer, Laguerre, asking that he take on the man's defence. She wrote Charcot, asking that he grant him an interview: "Lucas is not responsible for his actions, he's hypnotized. And he's pursued by voices, that completes the delirium." Charcot himself, she said, must declare the man not responsible for his actions.¹⁷

Lucas was made for a role in the drama of Louise Michel. Had he not existed, she would have had to create him. Were he not a mere thirty years of age, he could have been one of Trochu's Bretons whom she had so admired that fateful January day in City Hall square.* Lucas, born in Guerlesquin, Finistère, was poor, one of society's victims. He earned 120

* and both attacks took place on the same day, January 22 — *transl. note*

francs a month for his work as warehouseman to a coffee merchant; his wife, a good and simple Bretonne, earned 45 francs a month from the same exploiter. One child, twelve years of age. Lucas was a gentle man by nature except when he drank, and then he turned ugly. And that day, he had grown drunk on his own anger when he heard Louise attacking such a well-ordered society. It was being said that Lucas belonged to the Union of the Sacred Heart (presided over by the Count and Countess of Paris¹⁸), and had been provoked to his deed by a rural clergyman. This priest was then supposed to have been stricken with remorse and to have sought out Louise, offering to give himself up to the police. Louise, still according to what may be nothing more than saintly legend, apparently replied: "I forbid it. We have quite enough on our hands trying to save just one person."¹⁹

A reporter from *Le Matin* went to interview her.²⁰ "Is Lucas insane?" she repeated. "Probably. He's a Breton, so his folly may be religious in nature. And if he is a fanatic, dedicated to his cause, then he was right to act as he did and I would never reproach him for it." For Louise always preferred fanatics to the pussyfoots, extremists to reformers, *enragés* to the long-suffering, and mountain peaks to gentle hills.

The incident moved her once again to poetry, in which she was able to bring together seas, tempests and stone-age ancestors, of whom Lucas seemed the living contemporary:

*Ce fils de côtes de l'Armorique,
Des côtes où hurle la mer,
S'en allait, songeur et mystique
Par les grands vents au souffle amer.
Voyant l'océan redoutable,
La terre aux pauvre implacable
Et sans rien pour les consoler...*

He couldn't understand the people of his own age, or their eagerness for changes in society; he was in tune only with his "ancestors from the age of stone":

Nos espoirs sont pour lui des rêves,

And so he was subject to silent, terrible rage; driven to strike the blow:

*Laissez-le sur ses sombres grèves
Ses grèves où pleurent les vents...*

Anyway, we had no right to pass judgment on him:

Pour nous cet homme est un ancêtre

*Du temps de l'ancre au fond des bois.
 Pour le juger il faudrait être
 De ceux qui vivaient autrefois.
 Entre nous sont des jours sans nombre:
 Qu'il reste libre dans son ombre.
 Pour lui nous n'avons pas de lois.*²¹

The Le Havre incident, of course, put Louise back in the headlines. *Le Petit Havre*, "in the name of our entire courteous, hospitable population," was the first to protest the act of "revolting savagery." But it was still all Louise Michel's own fault, "he who sows the wind shall reap the whirlwind," continued the paper, with decided overtones of Bouvard and Pécuchet.* She might have a good and compassionate soul, but she was still "a dissident, who had been blinded by her love for the people." They could only hope that the attack would finally make her understand her work was both "evil and unhealthy."²² All the newspapers condemned Lucas' action and praised Louise, "one of the most respectable of all women," the personification of charity, according to *La Nation*.²³ *Le National* joined the praise: "A generous nature, driven by furious compassion which can produce both acts of great devotion and the most sinister of errors."²⁴ *Le Radical* called her, "a woman devoted to her friends and her beliefs, to the complete exclusion of self."²⁵ *Le Cri du Peuple* offered this explanation for Louise's reaction to the attack perpetrated upon her by that "proletarian," that "fanatic": "She will not accept the label of victim for herself, nor that of assassin for the one who threatened her life. Because of her intelligence and her tolerance, she now displays what people are calling clemency and what is, in fact, a deep sense of justice."²⁶

Violence had become a fact of French political life. The attack on Louise had followed shortly upon an attack made on Jules Ferry (who thought he'd been killed when in fact he hadn't suffered even a scratch, smirked *L'Intransigeant*).²⁷ Aubertin and Lucas had acted out of opposite political convictions but it showed that "we've entered the age of the revolver," as Paul de Cassagnac wrote in an article for *L'Autorité*, which called for a ban on firearms sales.²⁸ *Le Petit Journal* ran the banner headline, "The Abuse of the Revolver!"²⁹ and *Le National* fretted

* the mediocre, dilettante "heroes" of Flaubert's novel by the same name
 — transl. note

about the increasing loss of "respect for liberty, personality and human life."³⁰ According to this paper's analysis, the anarchists were mainly responsible for the creation of this new climate, and the Blanquists and Possibilists imitated them. Fists replaced discussion. It was the end of civilization: "The intellectual father of some anarchists is much more the Marquis de Sade than it is Prince Kropótkin."³¹ Camille Pelletan, in *La Justice*, urged his readers: "This tendency to criticize with blood rather than words is still in its infancy. We must join forces now in an attempt to stamp it out. That is the lesson we are taught by the hateful crime in Le Havre."³²

Louise was still supposed to be resting, but her rooms in Levallois-Perret were as full of people as ever. A reporter from *Le Cri du Peuple* found her sitting there with a black crêpe kerchief wrapped around her dressing. He had come expecting the figure made so familiar by endless cartoons: the avenging Fury, serpents writhing in her hair, eyes spitting flame... Instead, he reported, he found a good woman, a courageous woman, with somewhat opaque but still very lively grey-blue eyes. She talked about the separation of Church and State, a continuing subject of controversy: "I don't want them separated; I don't want either of them to exist."³³

Another journalist arrived, this one from *Le Gaulois*, a man who was clearly not accustomed to puffing his way up narrow, steep, ill-lit staircases or to conducting interviews in tiny, two-room lodgings that didn't even have curtains at the window. "So you'd like my news? I'm afraid it's hardly worth the effort it's cost you to get it: I'm doing fine." Lucas was a madman, and she would defend him. "People are taught to hate me, even children." She again explained her opposition to the separation of Church and State. And then she praised the author Zola in what, for the highly orthodox readers of *Le Gaulois*, must have amounted to a lecture on contemporary literature. Zola had taken a new lease on life with his book, *Germinal*. Furthermore, that book would perform a great service to future generations: "Once we have destroyed every vestige of the old society, people will read the works of the Master, and compare the old society with the new. Then they will know how great a service we revolutionaries have rendered to all humanity."³⁴

Chincholle turned up, her faithful enemy from *Le Figaro* who had been chronicling her life since her return from New

Caledonia with the kind of persistence usually reserved for chiefs of state. "So it's you!" she exclaimed. "You've caused me some pain in your time... If you'd like to please me this time, ask only that they not torment that poor soul who fired at me. He's a fanatic. Fanatics are very rare: depending on your point of view, you should either admire them or pity them." And she gave him a copy of one of her books. Chincholle (who knew nothing of Fourier) thought the title very odd: *Lectures encyclopédiques par cycles attractifs*. She inscribed it, "To Chincholle, enemy yet not enemy."³⁵

She told a reporter from *L'Intransigeant*: "I'd rather people shot me from point-blank range, than insulted me from a safe distance."³⁶

The anarchists decided Lucas was either a police informer who had been given the task of ridding society of Louise Michel, or a hired gun for the Orléanists, who were then very active in Normandy.³⁷ But they also decided to make no reprisals, as long as Louise did not die.³⁸

Her condition, however, worsened. She suffered so much from fever and severe headaches that she had to take to her bed. Dr. Demouly guessed that the bullet had worked its way through the cranium, coming to rest at the back of the head. This posed serious problems for any attempt at extraction. Louise's circle was very worried about her, and very angry with the endless string of policemen watching the house and even, in a variety of disguises, coming right into the apartment. "Despite suffering several relapses, Louise Michel still believes that her wound will have no unfortunate consequences. Nothing but sheer strength of character and, perhaps, pride have kept her on her feet until now," wrote agent A.I., who seemed to like her very much.³⁹ The one who signed his reports, "T," however, didn't like her at all. After mixing with her crowd of visitors (more than 300 of them on the 26th, despite the medical order for peace and quiet), he wrote: "That attempt at Le Havre was the happiest day of Louise Michel's life. More than anything, she likes to be noticed, and she's delighted with her constant parade of visitors..." And she *was* surrounded: dogs, cats, Dubois (from *L'Intransigeant*), Blossville (from *Le Cri du peuple*) and comrades Lucas and Delon who had come to report on a meeting they had attended that evening. Louise, as usual, talked a great deal. "I took my leave at 5 p.m., just as comrades Baudelot and Collin arrived," wrote agent T.,

finishing his report for the day. He seemed to be well-acquainted with all the anarchists, and may even have been one himself.⁴⁰

The Lucas family was grateful to Louise, and she received a letter of thanks signed by the sister-in-law, the widow Legall, née Le Bras (a Breton like the rest of them): "Whatever the outcome of this inquiry, it will have demonstrated two things, one is the incoherence of the unfortunate Lucas and the other is the greatness of your heart."⁴¹ Lucas himself wrote Louise a remorseful letter: "Madame, I come today to appeal to your good heart to intercede for me with the judges who will be asked to convict me. Forgive me, Madame, for my attempt upon your life." His crime had not been premeditated, it was a folly of the moment, and "ever since my arrest, I have been haunted by the thought of the harm I might have done you. Please be merciful, Madame, to me, my wife and my child. They have nobody but me to earn their bread."⁴²

Louise replied: "Monsieur Lucas, your letter gave me great joy. It shows yet again that you suffered from an hallucination and that you therefore cannot be tried. I am doing well, and my greatest desire is to see you reunited with your family. We hope to see that act of justice take place very soon. So please be of good courage."⁴³

But her condition was far from satisfactory. The solicitous agent A.I. reported that, whatever the papers might be claiming, in fact Louise was suffering many relapses and had great problems with her eyesight. "The doctors fear serious complications, for Louise Michel resists their order for complete bed-rest. She continues to write and receive visitors, and refuses to stay in bed." Agent A.I. really seemed very upset that Louise was proving so unreasonable.⁴⁴ Agent T. confirmed, but with a certain degree of pleasure, that her vision was deteriorating every day, that she could no longer work by artificial light at all and by natural light only for short periods at a time.⁴⁵ Constant headaches. Several days later, the informer who spent a few hours with Louise and anarchists Detelon and Chiroky reported that her vision was still weakening.⁴⁶ Louise, however, would not admit her fatigue, and helped Charles Malato organize the Cosmopolitan Anarchist Federation.⁴⁷

Telegrams of "solidarity, esteem and affection" arrived from the Socialist Federal Commission of Rome and from the

International Federation of Forli.⁴⁸ And in Lisbon, an army veteran publicly caned one Pinheiro Chagas, who had dared to write in *O Reporter*: "Louise Michel may indeed call the people to revolt, but the nearest policeman has the right to use his strong arm to reward her for her efforts."⁴⁹

Louise's attempt to prove that Lucas was not responsible for his actions had borne fruit: he was given provisional freedom while Aubertin, who had attacked Jules Ferry, was still in prison. (Jules Ferry, let it be noted, made no equivalent efforts on behalf of his own assailant.⁵⁰) Louise thanked her friends for their help: "For once, justice was done. Lucas is free. Thank you for your month of effort." She hoped that the case would eventually be declared a nonsuit.⁵¹

Lucas being a Breton, she was more aware than ever of her love and admiration for his distant, archaic province and its fanatic people whose Gaullish blood still ran fiercely in their veins. She therefore dusted off her long-standing project to convert the Chouans. Meanwhile, word spread that she had died of her wound. It was just a "song-and-dance," she insisted, and hurried to stop the music.⁵² The press would do better to spend its time defending anarchists Gallo and Cyvoct, who had just been sentenced to death. "That's of much more interest than the Wilson affair, or fabricated gossip about me."⁵³

And so, on March 4, with the bullet still lodged somewhere in her head, the tireless, dedicated old woman marked her return to the world of public meetings with an appearance among "the good people of Belleville." A crowd turned up to welcome her back and found she hadn't changed much, though perhaps she was a little thinner than usual. The main order of business was to protest the death sentences pronounced against Cyvoct and Gallo. Louise, "who spoke all evening," appealed again for the union of all revolutionary circles and clubs. When a member of the audience rose to denounce Lucas, Louise in turn rose to defend him: "He did the right thing, because he thought it was the right thing. [Louise never wavered in her belief that personal conscience was the guide to action.] He has the right to think differently than we do. I have nothing against him. In fact, I admire him because he's a man who, for once in his life, acted on his convictions."⁵⁴

The campaigns for and against General Boulanger were now in full fury. Naquet, a prominent Boulangist, had come up with a rather vague program that could be summarized in three

words: Dissolve, Constitute, Revise. Boulangists ran the gamut from workers and petit-bourgeois, angered by the parliamentary scandals which the Wilson affair had revealed; to jingoistic patriots who'd make war on Germany if that was what it would take to recover Alsace and Lorraine; to monarchists like the Baron de Mackau and the Duchesse d'Uzès, who financed the campaign; to the horrified bulk of the clergy, who were convinced that France was being run by the Freemasons.

Louise had no particular interest in this tempest in the bourgeois teapot, since society itself was the only correct target. But her friend Rochefort was now a prominent Boulangist: all the more reason, when she was asked to join the anti-Boulangist campaign, discreetly to refuse any involvement. "She didn't want to play the hot-heads' game against Rochefort, nor did she wish to offer any comfort to the government."⁵⁵ And so she washed her hands of both bourgeois factions, Opportunist and Boulangist alike.⁵⁶

Opinion in anarchist circles was very much divided. Gouzien and Tortelier urged Louise to take a stand against Boulanger; Pouget thought she was free to remain neutral as long as it served the anarchist cause.⁵⁷ On June 1, tired of being hounded and advised from all sides, she stated her position: "There is no need for fools and paid informers to struggle any longer to find out my opinion of present events. I shall tell you. This moment, when revolt — in other words, justice — is finally erupting here on earth, is not the moment for me to choose one side over another in a factionalist struggle, thereby leading comrades to fight over my dead body while our common enemy rejoices. My life is better spent defying the old world on behalf of the human International."⁵⁸ End of discussion.

On May 18, the Lucas affair had finally come before the Assizes Court of Seine-Inférieure. Louise, who both liked and knew this type of drama very well, went along to plead for her attacker. Said Lucas: "I'd drunk a lot and I didn't understand what they were all saying. I haven't enough education." Louise called for his acquittal: "At first, I thought it was all a joke. When I realized that the man really had fired the gun, I remembered that he had had the air of a dreamer [the Breton dream]... Lucas must have been in a somnambulist state. Gentlemen of the jury, I ask you to restore him his liberty. And I ask this, not out of generosity, but in a spirit of justice. Lucas

had been influenced by the crowd, by ideas he didn't understand. Contradictory opinions were expressed at the meeting, and that confused him all the more."

The judge (spitefully): "When he fired, you were in the process of denying the claim being made by some people that the whole purpose of these public meetings is your own financial benefit."

Louise: "They're idiots. We don't live from the cause, though we may die for it."

Me Laguerre, whom Louise had successfully begged to defend Lucas, made an excellent presentation. The jury was asked to consider only one question: "Is Lucas guilty?" It returned after a few moments' deliberation to reply, *no*. He hadn't set fire to a haystack, he hadn't killed anybody; in fact, if anybody was guilty, it was those parties who attacked family and property.

"Good, said Louise Michel, upon hearing of the acquittal.⁵⁹ That was also the opinion of the *Gazette des Tribunaux*, which devoted only a few lines to such an unimportant case.⁶⁰

Now the Lucas affair was over and just as well, for Louise had other things on her mind. One concern was the presentation of her play, *Le Coq rouge*, which had already known more than its share of problems.

She had written the play in 1882 and read it aloud at a benefit held in Salle de la Perle, Croix-Rousse district, for those convicted at the Lyon anarchist trial. *Le Nouvelliste* had then published some excerpts. Over the years, the manuscript had been borrowed, lost and found again innumerable times. Lis-bonne had once thought of staging it in Oran; Pascal Delagarde had thought of using it to open the Théâtre Beaumarchais. Those plans fell through, but now Delagarde was going to present it in the theatres of Batignolles-Montmartre and Folies-Voltaire.

The play was all about the day-to-day events of real life, Louise explained to a journalist from *Le Matin*.⁶¹ Some people are convicted for crimes they didn't commit... Then she told him the plot, for which we may be very grateful, since the events of this melodrama are all rather complicated.

Two naive young peasants, Paul and Rosalie, are being forced by their parents into a marriage neither of them wants, for Rosalie is secretly in love with Georges, and Paul with Jeanne (of "Moorish" descent). The two young people are also

victims of the undying hatred of Uncle Basile (a Catholic fanatic) and two old women. One of Uncle Basile's students, a "hypocrite and a criminal," has seduced the young girl, Marguerite, and forced her to murder the resulting child. He then accuses Paul and Rosalie of this murder, and stirs up the whole village against them. Paul and Rosalie flee to the woods, where they meet M. and Mme de Korfmaro, apparently from Brittany, who are aristocrats turned circus performers. The de Korfmaros invite Paul and Rosalie to join their troupe since the previous male and female lead performers have just run away. But the two old women manage to have the young couple and the aristocrats arrested, thanks to some complicated bit of business about one of Marguerite's slippers. The four innocents — Paul and Rosalie, M. and Mme de Korfmaro — are convicted of infanticide and sentenced to twenty years' hard labour. (The story *could* have ended there, but that would have been too easy.) Georges who loves Rosalie and Jeanne who loves Paul, go to Paris, where they are mistaken for Russian refugees and arrested. For once, error is recognized and corrected. But then Georges takes part in an uprising and is killed. Exit Georges. Jeanne, after a great many adventures in which she is always the innocent victim, is shut up in a brothel. She manages to escape by setting fire to the house. [Fire theme.] Paul, meanwhile, manages to escape from prison and goes to work in a mine. [Mine theme.] Twenty years pass. Rosalie, now free, arrives at the mine, which is on strike. The soldiers charge it, and the fight is on. Paul tells his comrades that resistance is useless, and that he will sacrifice his life for them. [Martyr theme.] He goes down into the mine, sets fire to it [fire theme again], and then dies. Rosalie, who has entered the mine with Paul, takes a pickaxe to the floodgate. The water rushes in. She dies. The two old women, who must be *very* old by now, since twenty years have passed, can do nothing but acknowledge the deaths of Paul and Rosalie.

In other words, a "real-life" story. It manages to bring all of Louise's favourite fantasies on stage: Bretons, fire, mine, water, final cataclysm. Only the wolves appear to be absent, though I may have missed them. And after all, the two old women did quite adequately as she-wolves.

The censors forced the deletion of the act in which Jeanne was a prisoner in the brothel. Not to worry: Louise, who never ran dry, replaced it with a tableau in which Rosalie and Jeanne

met in Saint-Lazare. The censors also erased the scene which showed two drunken municipal policemen. Obviously unacceptable! Nor were they very happy about allowing the play to close with the song, "La Carmagnole."* Louise had written special new verses for the occasion:

*Entendez-vous, là-bas, là-bas,
Du vieux monde enfin, c'est le glas,
Le glas, le glas.
Au lion la torche éclaire
Les faux, l'acier des coutelas,
Au loin la torche éclaire
Les rouges champs des combats.
Dansons la Carmagnole
Vive le son, Vive le son
Dansons la Carmagnole
Vive le son du canon.*

*...Le Coq rouge chante au matin,
Voici monter les meurt-de-faim...*

She told a *Le Matin* journalist about the idea that lay behind the drama: "It's an attack on the social misery which breeds ignorance and superstition. Society cannot be improved. The new Dawn will rise only through some great cataclysm. The two old women stand for unconscious Fate. Uncle Basile represents ignorance and piety, while Pascale represents hypocrisy."⁶²

And, she might have added, the red rooster represents fire in the folklore of many European countries.

Edinger published *Le Coq rouge*, with a preface by its author: "Here he is, with his wings and his head both clipped. Let him fly as best he can, poor lame little carcass. I'm not going to try to groom his feathers now."⁶³ He didn't fly very far. The Society of Authors and Composers paid Louise royalties of 57 fr 70 for the performances at the Folies-Voltaires, May 26-31; 4 fr 57 for the June 1 performance at the same theatre; and 163 fr 43 for the performances at the Batignolles theatre from June 12-25. Her June income then, was only 168

* revolutionary song of 1792, author unknown; "carmagnole" was the name of a jacket, originally worn by peasants from Carmagnola, adopted by Marseillais workers, taken to Paris by the Federated Marseillais and then adopted by the revolutionaries in general — *transl. note*

francs and even that was reduced to 162 fr 95 for reasons known only to the accountants.⁶⁴

In September, *Le Coq rouge* managed to fly as far as Salle des Porcherons, Avenue de Saint-Ouen. Louise tried to defend her "realistic" drama in front of an audience of 150 spectators (some said only 50), claiming that these scenes were daily occurrences in real life. Well, it's true that Louise had spent a great deal of time in prison, where amazing things do happen... The proceeds were so meagre that they had to scrounge about just to cover costs.⁶⁵ *Le Coq rouge* then limped as far as Charenton and, on September 13, 1888, finally died.⁶⁶

Louise had gone back to her strenuous round of meetings and lectures. She praised the construction workers' strike: "The strike, like the raging sea, is forever digging its bed just a little deeper and preparing for the day when it will overflow its banks, sweeping all before it." The crisis could only be resolved by violence: justice must finally kill injustice, social equality could rise only on the ruins of the old world. "Only then shall we see a free man, in a free universe."⁶⁷ Individual strikes weren't the weapon, for capital could always defeat them and then the workers' cause was weaker than ever. They needed "the great strike," the general strike that would "hit every industry and every branch of commerce and finally usher in the Social Revolution."⁶⁸

She continued to be besieged with invitations, and publicized as the star attraction for meetings about which she knew nothing. She protested: "I learn that this Saturday I am expected in a variety of places, whereas I must spend my time at 55 Avenue de Saint-Ouen instead" (defending *Le Coq rouge*).⁶⁹ People asked for appointments with her as if she were some bourgeois cabinet minister: "I don't understand why people indulge in this game of asking for an audience. It's much simpler to come to my apartment any morning than to oblige me to answer these requests. In fact, I won't answer them anymore. I have neither the time nor the money to spend on such silly formalities."⁷⁰

Some of her talks, now, were to elegant and worldly audiences in Salle des Capucines. On literature: "We've had enough of the Greeks, Romans and Romanticism. We need works like those by Zola, that speak of our own times."⁷¹ Her lecture on eternal progress led that evening's police informer to report: "She's been pictured as a kind of shrew, but she's

nothing like that at all. Just as academics work in the world of facts, she and her friends work in the world of ideas for the establishment of a better society.”⁷² Several speeches (October 3 and December 2, 13 and 30, 1888) were devoted to women’s rights and in particular to the International League of Women, with which she was very deeply involved. The fashionable ladies and gentlemen passed around copies of the first issue of the paper: “Now, as all the old lies collapse, women begin to take the place in humanity which, until now, people sought to deny them.” These were the critical, final days: “We must not allow ourselves to be duped by the false promises of the suffrage, it is a mirage... We should instead join the fight for progress and universal peace.”⁷³

Louise never changed her mind on the subject of female suffrage, and subsequent events have proven her right. Women have been granted, in principle, the political rights which they demanded but in capitalist and so-called socialist countries alike, they have been kept out of decision-making positions. The game of politics continues to be played without them, in the same old stupid, silly, criminal way.

Louise was equally opposed to the idea of demanding the right for women to work. In February 1890, she was to say, “You’re the ones who bear the responsibility of family and home, while men are responsible for work outside the home, production in all its forms. Once you are free, you must no longer deform your natural attributes, nor spend twelve to fourteen hours a day in the workshops.” Her longed-for form of social organization would not require women to leave their homes. Men would be able to supply the family’s needs. “Then, you’ll be free to educate your daughters.” This sentiment puts Louise in some unexpected company, and shows that even anarchists can have reactionary opinions.⁷⁴

It was inevitable that Louise should meet another of the great feminists of the era, the Duchesse d’Uzès, *née* Rochecouart-Mortmart. Here was another strong personality: a musician, writer, sculptor, fox-hunter and sailor (with her own yacht), she got her driver’s licence in 1898 and took her first airplane ride when she was more than eighty years old.⁷⁵ She was also very rich. A strong Boulangist, she served as intermediary between the General and the Comte de Paris who, she dearly hoped, would one day rule France. Orléanists were being accused of using some suitable third party to pass money

to the League of Women.⁷⁶ It's quite possible that some of the duchess's money took the same route, but that is pure conjecture. The duchess tells quite a different story of her relations with the *pétroleuse*. Louise was very sympathetically viewed in monarchist circles, despite her refusal to join the Boulangist campaign. *Le Gaulois* published an extravagantly enthusiastic article about her on May 29, 1888. Here was another who despised the "happy medium." She was lampooned and dragged through the mud; she merely laughed and tacked the most recent caricatures to her walls. Ugly? No, not with "this clear light in the eyes, this lovely smile, this look of gentle irony, this sparkle of intelligence and mischief." She liked to amuse herself on the omnibus by chatting with some bourgeois fellow-passenger about that dreadful old hag, Louise Michel and then, just as she alighted, calling back, "Oh, *monsieur*, I am Louise Michel..." She placed stray dogs and cats with dependable friends, keeping one particularly foul-tempered cat herself, because: "Poor beast, with a nature like that, whatever would become of him if I refused to keep him here?" And remember what the nuns in Saint-Lazare had said: "Now, there's one who had a Vocation. What a pity that she was led astray in her youth..."⁷⁷

One day Louise sent a man to tell the Duchess d'Uzès all about his plan to found a benefit society for sailors' widows. The duchess told him such a scheme was well beyond her means and anyway, it ought to be a responsibility of the State. Before he left, however, she gave him 200 francs "for Louise Michel's poor people." Thus began a partnership in charity. A while later, Louise sent her a little package of lacework, with a note saying: "Dear Madam d'Uzès, here is a memento of our dead friend, it was her last effort. I thank you on her behalf."⁷⁸ Louise, who was ill, added a request that the duchess pay her a visit. "I went... If this woman had had the gift of faith, she would undoubtedly have taken the veil and become a saint. It would be difficult for anybody to match her spirit of charity." While the duchess was still there, a "haggard" man entered and said, "Louise, I haven't worked for two days. I haven't eaten since yesterday morning. I can't take it any longer. I'm dying of hunger." Louise replied, "You've come just at the right moment. Here, eat this. I've finished." But, said the duchess, "She'd eaten nothing. Wasn't that the delicacy of a saint?"⁷⁹

From then on, Louise wrote frequently to the duchess.

Could she not find work for a young girl? Since correspondence between two "committed" women such as these would naturally arouse suspicions, Louise added an extra request at the bottom of the letter: "Would the individuals responsible for reading mail please seal this again and send it on its way? It's obvious that we're not talking about them."⁸⁰

She asked the duchess to take care of a family in distress: "We seem to have concluded some sort of pact between us, for I am at peace, knowing that the M... family is in your hands."⁸¹ Following a tour in the provinces, she wrote: "I beg you, think of Mme M... 's pictures. Nobody has yet been to see them and you know that they are her main support... Thank you with all my heart, for I know you will hurry to see them."⁸² She added a few words about her rural lectures: "What a difference from meetings here in Paris. People are 100% more calm and intelligent here. Here you have order during the meeting, and no street-urchins to hound you when you leave the hall."⁸³

Louise, with her usual indifference to money, never hesitated to ask for a donation: "My dear Madam d'Uzès, if you could help me right now, it would be the best time of all, for I am truly in distress. I embrace you."⁸⁴ She was "absolutely at the end of [her] resources," she confided to Vaughan and Rochefort, for whom it was a familiar story. The *L'Intransigeant* cashier replied that on April 23, they had given her an advance of 200 francs for the months of May and June.⁸⁵ The duchess responded generously. "My very dear Madam d'Uzès, you have saved me from great embarrassment. I thank you and embrace you most affectionately."⁸⁶

For Louise was not ungrateful. When the duchess' daughter, Simone, was married, Louise sent her an inexpensive little brooch which she had been wearing on the day of the murder attempt in Le Havre. "I can't offer you an expensive present, but I am happy to send you this brooch because I was wearing it the day someone tried to kill me. Since the attempt failed, I think it must be a lucky charm. Please accept it..."⁸⁷

Louise continued to travel: to Tours,⁸⁸ to Angers (where people applauded her for a graceful reference to the Vendean wars: she said her grandfather Demahis had told her of those epic days when both Whites and Blues knew how to die as heroes...⁸⁹), and to Rouen. In Rouen, malicious tongues said "la Boulange" had come to meddle in their affairs,⁹⁰ for rumours still persisted that she was running a Boulangist

network from her lodgings. "It's either a deliberate, wicked lie, or just a stupid remark," was her reply.⁹¹ But the story spread abroad: *Central News* claimed that General Boulanger had had discussions with Louise Michel.⁹²

On April 1, 1889, the general, fearing arrest, fled to Belgium. By April 12, proceedings were underway not only against the general but against Rochefort and Dillon as well. Louise, of course, was asked her opinion: she shrugged, said the proceedings were "just one more burlesque. All it suggests is the approaching collapse of this regime which we must as yet still endure."⁹³

The Universal Exposition of 1889 provided her with more congenial subject matter: technical progress and human rapprochement. "The Eiffel Tower has set cities dreaming of iron lacework, not stone, for their crowning glories. The twentieth century will see man's genius spectacularly transformed, and great strides in daring and invention. Tomorrow's art will know no limits. Despite a few reversals, the pace of universal progress is quickening once again."⁹⁴ She praised the new machines, "which will replace muscle-power and create new jobs." Today, she said, machines still crush the workers but, "after expropriation," they'll mean new life for all humanity.⁹⁵

She hoped, too, that the French workers who flocked to Paris for the Exposition would rally to the Revolution and lay the basis for an alliance of all French trade unions.⁹⁶ Louise was making as many speeches as ever: one day a talk on universal peace in the elegant Salle des Capucines⁹⁷ before an audience of foreign visitors; a few days earlier before quite a different audience in the Taverne du Bagne, which was run by her old comrade Lisbonne. There the audience consisted of delegates from the international congresses and interpreters were busily translating the speakers' words into the necessary variety of languages.⁹⁸

In August, Louise was so seriously ill that there was even talk of her death. By October 1, however, she was back to her usual schedule. This time she read a vaudeville piece, *Théâtre des Folies-Bourbon*, for an audience gathered in Salle des Capucines. Robbery, blackmail and every other parliamentary vice imaginable were worked into the plot, which even included the attempted seduction of a beautiful maiden (the Republic) by a handsome military officer (Boulanger). Fortunately, the mass of the poor and downtrodden were able to put an end to all this

moral turpitude.⁹⁹

Louise wanted to get away. She was tired of bourgeois France — in fact, of bourgeois Europe, for her dream now was to help make the Revolution in South America. She spoke to a university crowd on Rue de Jussieu as part of their fund-raising evening for a young companion who hoped to go to Chile. "That's where we must spread the word of the Revolution." Europe was a disappointment: it didn't matter which revolutionary party you mentioned, she had friends in it and she knew their efforts had so far come to nothing. So perhaps she too, one day, would pack her bags.¹⁰⁰ Her friends worried. They thought her enthusiasm for this young travelling revolutionary would turn out to be just one more example of her gullibility.¹⁰¹

South America certainly seemed to be the revolutionaries' best hope at the time. The Brazilian Empire had just ended, and Louise was delighted: "The Republic of Brazil foreshadows what is to come in Spain and Portugal," she prophesied. The emperor had been a good man in his private life, yet evil and despotic in his public role, "for power degrades and brutalizes." That was why you couldn't expect any good to come from the exercise of power or from parliaments, whether socialist or not.¹⁰² That was why she never voted, and urged others to follow her example. "It doesn't matter who emerges from that false-bottomed trunk known as the ballot box. He'll always be one of the bourgeoisie, one of your exploiters," she told the workers of Saint-Ouen. "Deputies do just one thing, they pass laws that make sure you remain slaves. They're against your interests... Don't vote. Keep your ballot in your pocket. You're the majority, so the power is yours... Long live the Social Revolution!"¹⁰³

Just as she had refused to take sides in the Boulanger affair, she now refused to applaud the arrest of the young Duc d'Orléans. He had returned to France for his military service, but the government was afraid he might be there to mount the throne instead. Louise looked at these twists and turns of a frightened pseudo-Republic with jaded eyes. It was all part of "the carnival of politics," and it disgusted her.¹⁰⁴

The police were still monitoring her relations with the Duchesse d'Uzès. The duchess asked Louise for a copy of Kropotkin's *Les Paroles d'un révolté*, to be passed on to the Duc d'Orléans.¹⁰⁵ Louise sent her friend Charlotte Vauvelle to

the duchess with the book, and with a request for the price of a theatre ticket to a benefit performance for a woman named Bias (or, Biras).¹⁰⁶ How did the police find this out? Perhaps Charlotte Vauvelle told them?

Louise was also said to have been contacted by the Marquis de Morès, who wanted to persuade her to support Drumont.*¹⁰⁷ Whatever political intrigues these aristocrats might be trying to promote, they did have money, and the anarchists were always very happy to divert as much of it as they could to their own propaganda efforts. It's not surprising, then, that Louise was also said to have obtained Morès' address from Michel Zevaco and then channelled funds from the marquis to Grave and Pouget.¹⁰⁸

However they met, it was through that connection that Barrès** in turn met Louise Michel. As he remembered it: "I once had the pleasure of embracing Louise Michel who was then some sixty years old. It must have been around January of 1890 when Morès asked me, 'Shall we go to the Epinettes together?' I think that's the right date, and the right place. I remember vaguely some theatrical presentation in violent, anarchistic surroundings. And then, we embraced Louise Michel."¹⁰⁹

This tactical alliance between royalists and anarchists can be easily explained: they had a common enemy, the bourgeois republic. They could agree on its destruction — though its replacement, of course, was another question entirely. Yet that was never Louise's question. She gave herself one role only, and that was to demolish the old world. While the ministry that had just fallen had done "nothing good, there's no reason to rejoice in its fall, for the next one will be no better."

She dismissed the socialist Possibilists*** as well, for their goal was simply to replace the bourgeois in power.¹¹⁰ The government's foreign policy was detestable. The German emperor, in an effort to ease his country's relations with

* see transl. note p. 256

** French writer Maurice Barrès (1862 - 1923)

*** the Possibilists, a faction of the Worker's Party, argued that the party should place less emphasis on being socialist and more on being labour-oriented — i.e. on addressing the *immediate* needs of the working class. This was to be done by gaining political power, and then organizing the public services to meet those needs. The strategy employed was to be elected to municipal offices, especially in Paris. The Possibilists can be said to be the founders of "municipal socialism" — *transl. notes*

France, had organized a conference on social affairs. The French delegates had been quite incapable of dealing with the questions at hand.¹¹¹ And even had they risen to the occasion, the Berlin conference proposals — for an eight-hour working day, for example — were nothing but traps for the working class. The only way to improve the workers' conditions was to overthrow governments (the way they'd overthrown Pedro in Brazil), seize private property and return it to the collectivity. The people should turn their guns against their own governments!¹¹²

And what about this Franco-Russian alliance? "You can't have an alliance between a free people and slaves."¹¹³ Then there were the colonial expeditions. "The murderers and charlatans who govern us manage to make a lot of people swallow the idea that somehow, way out there in Dahomey, the honour of the flag is at stake." People should refuse to pay their taxes, mothers should send their sons out of the country rather than let them do military service!¹¹⁴

Louise denounced the old world to audiences that spanned the entire social range. She spoke to workers and petit-bourgeois in popular meetings; she spoke to the elegant and worldly sophisticates of Salle des Capucines. *L'Egalité* commented: "At first, one is slightly bored, and then, won over. Involuntary shivers up the spine suggest that this working-class woman is somebody to reckon with, somebody noble and inspired."¹¹⁵

XVI - MAY 1, 1890

Louise took all her standard topics (as unvarying as the country priest's standard sermons) and put them together in a booklet. *Prise de possession*¹ taught that truth rises from the slums, lies rain down from above. The downtrodden have tried repeatedly to free themselves but, in their ignorance, were as ineffective as a flock of sheep. Now humanity itself was stirring: all people, everywhere, would bring freedom to all. Louise used the old religious imagery, human wheat ground by the mills, grapes crushed by the press... The old world was crumbling. Capital was a fiction; it needed man's labour to survive. The Social Republic would belong to all, a free world for a free humanity.

Universal suffrage was a joke: "the universal prayer to deaf gods." Cannibalism had disappeared, so would capital ("heart of the vampire"). Through labour, science and the arts, the heritage of all mankind would be appropriated and transformed — machines, the earth, even the forces of nature, for what were they but instruments? From primitive man to ranks of machines was merely one cycle which would now close, as some other cycle opened up. And there would be one cycle after another, eternally, "like widening circles from a stone thrown into water." New forms of energy would appear and, "there are no words to describe the things yet to happen." Her generation, she herself, was the last of an age. Others would come, to build anew. Someday, a few hours of voluntary labour would be enough to produce all the consumer goods that were

needed. "Appropriation" was a better term for this transformation than "expropriation," because it made it clear that nobody was to be excluded.

And this transformation would come about through the general strike, the "great strike" which was even now beginning to take shape. It had no "ringleader," no "agitator" at the top, it was being pushed along by the "life instinct" that said, Rebel or Die. Soon, small merchants who'd been ruined by big enterprise would join the workers' rebellion, so would the "threadbare" petty clerks. Then the great appropriation would happen at last. Anarcho-communism was right there, on the horizon, its first stirrings already being felt in Germany, England, Belgium, Brazil and the United States. "United, we can conquer the world," said Vercingetorix to the Gauls... So listen, Bagaudes! Listen Jacques!* It's time! "Listen to the songs of the old Gaullish bards. The captive's blood soaks red into the earth, and the earth will flower, flower in red beauty, and the captive will be avenged."

But deliverance had not yet come. Human sheep who dared to rebel were still being sung a lullaby of lies about high policy or sent off to that abattoir reserved for their kind, the wars. Soon, though, soon, revolt would break out again and then it would be the final revolt, the general strike...or the final catastrophe. One way or the other, power structures would crumble. So, peasant, listen: don't feed your sons to war, don't feed your daughters to prostitution, don't pay your taxes. Say *no*. And you too, city worker, slum-dweller: say *no* to everything except the general strike. You live in a social death-trap, where your only choice is to cheat or be cheated. But soon, we'll have communism. Can anyone own the sun? Or the ocean? They can't be divided, they're common property. "Well then, everything will belong to everybody."

The booklet went on, shaking its examples in people's faces. During the Tonkin revolt, French forces beheaded the partisan leader, Doï-Van, and then threw the head to the waiting dogs. Have you had enough, comrades? Proletarians, if you go on struggling to get a few of your number elected to parliament, you should see a socialist majority in about 30,000 years... Does the parliamentary comedy still amuse you? Meanwhile, the poor can choose between being thrown into

* see transl. notes pp. 17 and 14

prison, or throwing themselves into the Seine. Listen to Walt Whitman: the death of the old world will be the birth of the new. Whether by strike, plague or war, that vampire, Capital, will receive its death-blow. When everybody seizes everything, then all will be free.

Louise then conjured up the future, the magnificent cities of the human federation — “underwater cities, contained in submarine ships as large as whole provinces; cities suspended in mid-air, perhaps orbiting with the seasons.”

But meanwhile, Prometheus was still chained to his rock; the sun still circled an earth of power, force and brutal misery, but tomorrow’s sun would know a world where “revolt had ended.” Make way for the Social Revolution! for the world of all humanity! for endless, boundless progress! for universal harmony between all men and all things that exist! Make way! Anarchy is the future of mankind!

Louise still had the simple faith.

She would soon have the chance to put that faith into action once again. The 1889 International Congress in Paris had decided, at the suggestion of a delegate named Lavigne (representing the Workers’ Party and the unions of the Gironde), to organize international demonstrations of working-class solidarity for May 1. The date, of course, was chosen to commemorate the famous Chicago general strike and the violent reprisals that followed. Plans for the demonstration in France were now well-advanced, but the political and syndical organizations were still deeply divided about both means and goals of the rally. The Guesdists wanted a peaceful demonstration, with delegates being sent to present public authorities with lists of workers’ grievances. The anarchists, on the other hand, wanted to give the day a revolutionary character.

Louise Michel vacillated between the two camps, while newspapers asked themselves what decision the “high priestess of anarchy” would finally make. “Will you join the demonstration?” asked a reporter from *Le Petit National*. “Of course, even if just to satisfy my curiosity... Anyway, I love crowds.”

But in fact, she thought the demonstration was a naive idea, just as naive as the agitation for an eight-hour day, because neither would lead to the great, general strike. Furthermore, she no longer believed that mass movements were the best revolutionary weapon... Her opinions at the time were taking on a decidedly Blanquist colouring. “Twenty determined

men could achieve more than all the crowds in the world," she said. "I've seen such cowardly mobs in my time, and such brave individuals..." And she thought of Lisbonne, "dancing under the Versailles gunfire," or Cecilia who calmly went on discussing mathematics as bullets rained all around them, or Dombrowski in the Commune's final battle.

"After all the propaganda you've made, aren't you afraid that somebody is going to get you?" She laughed. Twenty-two threatening letters had arrived just the day before.² What did it matter? Her mother was dead, and her heart permanently empty. Except for the Revolution.

Whatever her private reservations about the May 1 demonstration, though, she went on promoting it. She went to Reims,³ to Lyon (where she defended the weavers who were on trial for provocation⁴) and finally, April 27, to Saint-Etienne (where huge posters publicized Michel and Tennevin, "famous revolutionaries in Paris and the provinces"⁵) and a meeting in the Bellevue tavern.

She told the crowd that the time was ripe for action, and called on the workers to take to the streets on May 1. Will you always let yourselves be swindled? she asked; will you always fall for their promises? Will you never lose your faith in universal suffrage, even though it has never yet resolved the social question or brought about liberty?

Tennevin attacked the "rogues" that governed them all, told his audience that servitude and feudalism still existed, even if in other disguises. The anarchist party, he promised, would be on the Parisian streets come May 1 and all Constans'* troops couldn't stop them, they'd meet force with force...⁶

The two of them then left Saint-Etienne for Firminy and Saint-Chamond.⁷

Louise then passed through Lyon once again, but without stopping, for she was on her way to Vienne.**⁸ By now, the highest reaches of officialdom had had quite enough of her speeches. Even so, the Lyon public prosecutor asked the Keeper of the Seals if he really thought it "opportune" to launch proceedings against Louise Michel for her Saint-Etienne speech. It was her standard speech, full of her standard topics. He had to add that no organization had been set up: the anarchists,

* minister of the Interior — *author's note*

** a town in south-east France, not the capital of Austria — *transl. note*